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EXHIBIT 31

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Advance praise for Tracy Wolff's Crave

"Crave sucked me into its dangerous—but oh so delicious—world.

Suffice it to say: I have a new book boyfriend!"

—Pintin Dunn New York Times bestselling

-Pintip Dunn, New York Times bestselling author of Malice

"Crave is this generation's Twilight."

-Lynn Rush, New York Times bestselling author of the Touch of Frost series

"I'm having the BEST book hangover. Filled with danger, humor, and heart, *Crave* proves that vampires are definitely back!"

—New York Times bestselling author J. Kenner

"Intricately crafted, deeply romantic, and with an ending that blew me away. I can't wait for the next installment."

-Victoria Scott, author of the Fire & Flood series

"Funny, smart, and compelling—Tracy Wolff's *Crave* is an addictive masterpiece!"

- -Emily McKay, national bestselling author of Storybound
- "Full of intrigue and mystery and with a sizzling romance, *Crave* is my new paranormal obsession!"
 - -Mary Lindsey, author of Haven
- "Crave will consume you... and leave you aching for more."

 -A. K. Wilder, author of Crown of Bones
 - "Wolff's book demands to be devoured whole—one wickedly delicious chapter at a time."
 - -Cheyenne, @cheykspeare bookstagrammer
 - "A sharp and brilliantly entertaining vampire tale, with sexual tension you can cut with a knife."
 - $Suzy, @the haunted fae \ bookstagrammer \\$
 - "If you love brooding vampires, tons of action, and an epic romance, you will love *Crave*."
 - -Kay, @mamabear_reads bookstagrammer
 - "The mystery of it all kept me turning each page!"

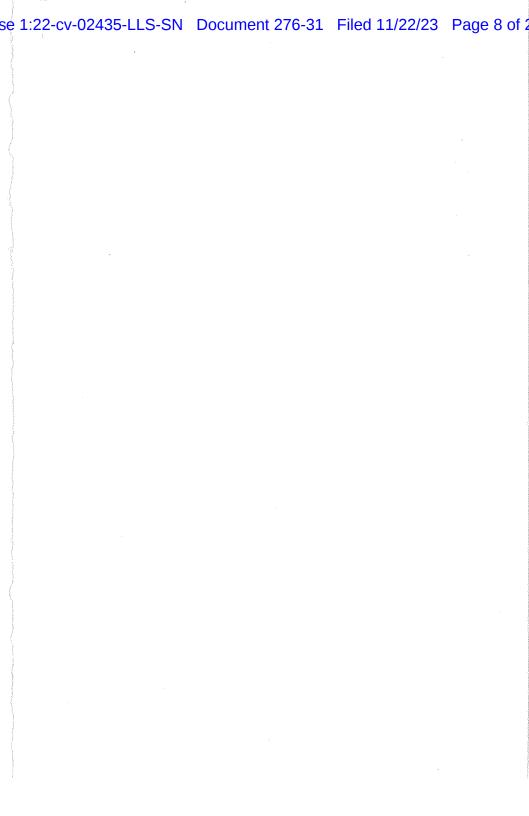
 —Julith, @nerdy little julith bookstagrammer

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

TRACY WOLFF

craye

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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For My Boys, Who Have Always Believed in Me and For Stephanie, Who Helped Me Believe in Myself Again.

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If You're Not Living on the Edge, You're Taking Up Too Much Space

stand at the outer tarmac door staring at the plane I am about to get on and try my hardest not to freak out.

It's easier said than done.

Not just because I'm about to leave behind everything I know, though up until two minutes ago, that was my main concern. Now, though, as I stare at this plane that I'm not even sure deserves the dignity of being called a plane, a whole new level of panic is setting in.

"So, Grace." The man my uncle Finn sent to pick me up looks down at me with a patient smile. Philip, I think he said his name was, but I can't be sure. It's hard to hear him over the wild beating of my heart. "Are you ready for an adventure?"

No. No, I am *not* the least bit ready—for an adventure or anything else that's about to come my way.

If you had told me a month ago that I would be standing on the outskirts of an airport in Fairbanks, Alaska, I would've said that you were misinformed. And if you had told me that the whole reason I was in Fairbanks was to catch the tiniest puddle jumper in existence to what feels like the very edge of the world—or, in this case, a town on the edge of Denali, the

highest mountain in North America-I would have said that you were high as a freaking kite. But a lot can change in thirty days. And even more can get

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ripped away. In fact, the only thing I have been able to count on these

past few weeks is that no matter how bad things are, they can always get worse...

Landing Is Just Throwing Yourself at the Ground and Hoping You Don't Miss

here she is," Philip says as we clear the peaks of several mountains, taking one hand off the steering column to point to a small collection of buildings in the distance. "Healy, Alaska. Home sweet home."

"Oh, wow. It looks..." Tiny. It looks really, really tiny. Way smaller than just my neighborhood in San Diego, let alone the whole city.

Then again, it's pretty hard to see much of anything from up here. Not because of the mountains that loom over the area like long-forgotten monsters but because we're in the middle of a weird kind of haze that Philip refers to as "civil twilight" even though it's barely five o'clock. Still, I can see well enough to make out that the so-called town he's pointing at is full of mismatched buildings randomly grouped together.

I finally settle on, "Interesting. It looks...interesting."

It's not the first description that popped into my head—no, that was the old cliché that hell has actually frozen over—but it is the most polite one as Philip drops even lower, preparing for what I'm pretty sure will be yet another harrowing incident in the list of harrowing incidents that have plagued me since I got

on the first of three planes ten hours ago.

Sure enough, I've only just spotted what passes for an airport in this one-thousand-person town (thank you, Google) when Philip says, "Hang on, Grace. It's a short runway because it's hard to keep a long one clear of snow or ice for any amount of time out here. It's going to be a quick landing."

I have no idea what a "quick landing" means, but it doesn't sound good. So I grab the bar on the plane door, which I'm pretty sure exists for just this very reason, and hold on tight as we drop lower and lower.

"Okay, kid. Here goes nothing!" Philip tells me. Which, by the way, definitely makes the top five things you don't *ever* want to hear your pilot say while you're still in the air.

The ground looms white and unyielding below us, and I squeeze my eyes shut.

Seconds later, I feel the wheels skip across the ground. Then Philip hits the brakes hard enough to slam me forward so fast that my seat belt is the only thing keeping my head from meeting the control panel. The plane whines—not sure what part of it is making that horrendous noise or if it's a collective death knell—so I choose not to focus on it.

Especially when we start skidding to the left.

I bite my lip, keep my eyes squeezed firmly shut even as my heart threatens to burst out of my chest. If this is the end, I don't need to see it coming.

The thought distracts me, has me wondering just what my mom and dad might have seen coming, and by the time I shut down that line of thinking, Philip has the plane sliding to a shaky, shuddering halt.

I know exactly how it feels. Right now, even my toes are trembling.

I peel my eyes open slowly, resisting the urge to pat myself

down to make sure I really am still in one piece. But Philip just laughs and says, "Textbook landing."

Maybe if that textbook is a horror novel. One he's reading upside down and backward.

I don't say anything, though. Just give him the best smile I can manage and grab my backpack from under my feet. I pull out the pair of gloves Uncle Finn sent me and put them on. Then I push open the plane door and jump down, praying the whole time that my knees will support me when I hit the ground.

They do, just barely.

After taking a few seconds to make sure I'm not going to crumble—and to pull my brand-new coat more tightly around me because it's literally about eight degrees out here—I head to the back of the plane to get the three suitcases that are all that is left of my life.

I feel a pang looking at them, but I don't let myself dwell on everything I had to leave behind, any more than I let myself dwell on the idea of strangers living in the house I grew up in. After all, who cares about a house or art supplies or a drum kit when I've lost so much more?

Instead, I grab a bag out of what passes for the tiny airplane's cargo hold and wrestle it to the ground. Before I can reach for the second, Philip is there, lifting my other two suitcases like they're filled with pillows instead of everything I own in the world.

"Come on, Grace. Let's go before you start to turn blue out here." He nods toward a parking lot—not even a building, just a parking lot—about two hundred yards away, and I want to groan. It's so cold out that now I'm shaking for a whole different reason. How can anyone live like this? It's unreal, especially considering it was seventy degrees where I woke up this morning.

There's nothing to do but nod, though, so I do. Then grab onto the handle of my suitcase and start dragging it toward a

small patch of concrete that I'm pretty sure passes for an airport in Healy. It's a far cry from San Diego's bustling terminals.

Philip overtakes me easily, a large suitcase dangling from each hand. I start to tell him that he can pull the handles out and roll them, but the second I step off the runway and onto the snowy ground that surrounds it in all directions, I figure out why he's carrying them—it's pretty much impossible to roll a heavy suitcase over snow.

I'm near frozen by the time we make it halfway to the (thankfully still plowed) parking lot, despite my heavy jacket and synthetic fur-lined gloves. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do from here, how I'm supposed to get to the boarding school my uncle is headmaster of, so I turn to ask Philip if Uber is even a thing up here. But before I can get a word out, someone steps from behind one of the pickup trucks in the lot and rushes straight toward me.

I think it's my cousin, Macy, but it's hard to tell, considering she's covered from head to toe in protective weather gear.

"You're here!" the moving pile of hats, scarves, and jackets says, and I was right—it's definitely Macy.

"I'm here," I agree dryly, wondering if it's too late to reconsider foster care. Or emancipation. Any living situation in San Diego has got to be better than living in a town whose airport consists of one runway and a tiny parking lot. Heather is going to die when I text her.

"Finally!" Macy says, reaching out for a hug. It's a little awkward, partly because of all the clothes she's wearing and partly because—despite being a year younger than my own seventeen years—she's about eight inches taller than I am. "I've been waiting for more than an hour."

I hug her back but let go quickly as I answer. "Sorry, my plane was late from Seattle. The storm there made it hard to take off."

"Yeah, we hear that a lot," she tells me with a grimace. "Pretty sure their weather is even worse than ours."

I want to argue—miles of snow and enough protective gear to give astronauts pause seem pretty freaking awful to me. But I don't know Macy all that well, despite the fact that we're cousins, and the last thing I want to do is offend her. Besides Uncle Finn and now Philip, she is the only other person I know in this place.

Not to mention the only family I have left.

Which is why, in the end, I just shrug.

It must be a good enough answer, though, because she grins back at me before turning to Philip, who is still carrying my suitcases. "Thanks so much for picking her up, Uncle Philip. Dad says to tell you he owes you a case of beer."

"No worries, Mace. Had to run a few errands in Fairbanks anyway." He says it so casually, like hopping in a plane for a couple-hundred-mile round-trip journey is no big deal. Then again, out here where there's nothing but mountains and snow in all directions, maybe it's not. After all, according to Wikipedia, Healy has only one major road in and out of it, and in the winter sometimes even that gets closed down.

I've spent the last month trying to imagine what that looks like. What it *is* like.

I guess I'm about to find out.

"Still, he says he'll be around Friday with that beer so you guys can watch the game in true bro-mance style." She turns to me. "My dad's really upset he couldn't make it out to pick you up, Grace. There was an emergency at the school that no one else could deal with. But he told me to get him the second we make it back."

"No worries," I tell her. Because what else am I supposed to say? Besides, if I've learned anything in the month since my parents died, it's just how little most things matter.

Who cares who picks me up as long as I get to the school?

Who cares where I live if it's not going to be with my mom and dad?

Philip walks us to the edge of the cleared parking lot before finally letting go of my suitcases. Macy gives him a quick hug goodbye, and I shake his hand, murmur, "Thanks for coming to get me."

"Not a problem at all. Any time you need a flight, I'm your man." He winks, then heads back to the tarmac to deal with his plane.

We watch him go for a couple of seconds before Macy grabs the handles on both suitcases and starts rolling them across the tiny parking lot. She gestures for me to do the same with the one I'm holding on to, so I do, even though a part of me wants nothing more than to run back onto the tarmac with Philip, climb back into that tiny plane, and demand to be flown back to Fairbanks. Or, even better, back home to San Diego.

It's a feeling that only gets worse when Macy says, "Do you need to pee? It's a good ninety-minute ride to the school from here."

Ninety minutes? That doesn't seem possible when the whole town looks like we could drive it in fifteen, maybe twenty minutes at the most. Then again, when we were flying over, I didn't see any building remotely big enough to be a boarding school for close to four hundred teenagers, so maybe the school isn't actually in Healy.

I can't help but think of the mountains and rivers that surround this town in all directions and wonder where on earth I'm going to end up before this day is through. And where exactly she expects me to pee out here anyway.

"I'm okay," I answer after a minute, even as my stomach somersaults and pitches nervously.

This whole day has been about getting here, and that was bad

enough. But as we roll my suitcases through the semi-darkness, the well-below-freezing air slapping at me with each step we take, everything gets superreal, superfast. Especially when Macy walks through the entire parking lot to the *snowmobile* parked just beyond the edge of the pavement.

At first, I think she's joking around, but then she starts loading my suitcases onto the attached sled and it occurs to me that this is really happening. I'm really about to ride a snowmobile in the near dark through *Alaska* in weather that is more than *twenty degrees below freezing*, if the app on my phone can be believed. All that's missing is the wicked witch cackling that she's going

All that's missing is the wicked witch cackling that she's going to get me and my little dog, too. Then again, at this point, that would probably be redundant.

I watch with a kind of horrified fascination as Macy straps my suitcases to the sled. I should probably offer to help, but I wouldn't even know where to begin. And since the last thing I want is for the few belongings I have left in the world to be strewn across the side of a mountain, I figure if there was ever a time to leave things to the experts, this is it.

"Here, you're going to need these," Macy tells me, opening up the small bag that was already strapped to the sled when we got out here. She rummages around for a second before pulling out a pair of heavy snow pants and a thick wool scarf. They are both hot pink, my favorite color when I was a kid but not so much now. Still, it's obvious Macy remembered that from the last time I saw her, and I can't help being touched as she holds them out to me.

"Thanks." I give her the closest thing to a smile I can manage.

After a few false starts, I manage to pull the pants on over the thermal underwear and fleece pajama pants with emojis on them (the only kind of fleece pants I own) that I put on at my uncle's instruction before boarding the plane in Seattle. Then I take a

long look at the way Macy's rainbow-colored scarf is wrapped around her neck and face and do the same thing with mine.

It's harder than it looks, especially trying to get it positioned well enough to keep it from sliding down my nose the second I move.

Eventually, I manage it, though, and that's when Macy reaches for one of the helmets draped over the snowmobile's handles.

"The helmet is insulated, so it will help keep you warm as well as protect your head in case of a crash," she instructs. "Plus, it's got a shield to protect your eyes from the cold air."

"My eyes can freeze?" I ask, more than a little traumatized, as I take the helmet from her and try to ignore how hard it is to breathe with the scarf over my nose.

"Eyes don't freeze," Macy answers with a little laugh, like she can't help herself. "But the shield will keep them from watering and make you more comfortable."

"Oh, right." I duck my head as my cheeks heat up. "I'm an idiot."

"No you're not." Macy wraps an arm around my shoulders and squeezes tight. "Alaska is a lot. Everyone who comes here has a learning curve. You'll figure it all out soon enough."

I'm not holding my breath on that one—I can't imagine that this cold, foreign place will ever feel familiar to me—but I don't say anything. Not when Macy has already done so much to try and make me feel welcome.

"I'm really sorry you had to come here, Grace," she continues after a second. "I mean, I'm really excited that you're here. I just wish it wasn't because..." Her voice drifts off before she finishes the sentence. But I'm used to that by now. After weeks of having my friends and teachers tiptoe around me, I've learned that no one wants to say the words.

Still, I'm too exhausted to fill in the blanks. Instead, I slip my head in the helmet and secure it the way Macy showed me.

"Ready?" she asks once I've got my face and head as protected as they're going to get.

The answer hasn't changed since Philip asked me that same question in Fairbanks. *Not even close*. "Yeah. Absolutely."

I wait for Macy to climb on the snowmobile before getting on behind her.

"Hold on to my waist!" she shouts as she turns it on, so I do. Seconds later, we're speeding into the darkness that stretches endlessly in front of us.

I've never been more terrified in my life.

2

Just Because You Live in a Tower Doesn't Make You a Prince

he ride isn't as bad as I thought it would be.

I mean, it's not good, but that has more to do with the fact that I've been traveling all day and I just want to get someplace—anyplace—where I can stay longer than a layover. Or a really long snowmobile ride.

And if that place also happens to be warm and devoid of the local wildlife I can hear howling in the distance, then I'm all about it. Especially since everything south of my waist seems to have fallen asleep...

I'm in the middle of trying to figure out how to wake up my very numb butt when we suddenly veer off the trail (and I mean "trail" in the loosest sense of the word) we've been following and onto a kind of plateau on the side of the mountain. It's as we wind our way through yet another copse of trees that I finally see lights up ahead.

"Is that Katmere Academy?" I shout.

"Yeah." Macy lays off the speed a little, steering around trees like we're on a giant slalom course. "We should be there in about five minutes."

Thank God. Much longer out here and I might actually lose

a toe or three, even with my doubled-up wool socks. I mean, everyone knows Alaska is cold, but can I just say—it's freaking *cold*, and I was *not* prepared.

Yet another roar sounds in the distance, but as we finally clear the thicket of trees, it's hard to pay attention to anything but the huge building looming in front of us, growing closer with every second that passes.

Or should I say the huge *castle* looming in front of us, because the dwelling I'm looking at is nothing like a modern building. And absolutely nothing like any school I have *ever* seen. I tried to Google it before I got here, but apparently Katmere Academy is so elite even Google hasn't heard of it.

First of all, it's big. Like, really big...and sprawling. From here it looks like the brick wall in front of the castle stretches halfway around the mountain.

Second, it's elegant. Like, really, really elegant, with architecture I've only heard described in my art classes before. Vaulted arches, flying buttresses, and giant, ornate windows dominate the structure.

And third, as we get closer, I can't help wondering if my eyes are deceiving me or if there are gargoyles—actual gargoyles—protruding from the top of the castle walls. I know it's just my imagination, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't half expect to see Quasimodo waiting for us when we finally get there.

Macy pulls up to the huge gate at the front of the school and enters a code. Seconds later, the gate swings open. And we're on our way again.

The closer we get, the more surreal everything feels. Like I'm trapped in a horror movie or Salvador Dalí painting. Katmere Academy may be a Gothic castle, but at least there's no moat, I tell myself as we break through one last copse of trees. And no fire-breathing dragon guarding the entrance. Just a long, winding

driveway that looks like every other prep school driveway I've ever seen on TV—except for the fact that it's covered in snow. Big shock. And leads right up to the school's huge, incredibly ornate front doors.

Antique doors.

Castle doors.

I shake my head to clear it. I mean, what even is my life right now?

"Told you it wouldn't be bad," Macy says as she pulls up to the front with a spray of snow. "We didn't even see a caribou, let alone a wolf."

She's right, so I just nod and pretend I'm not completely overwhelmed.

Pretend like my stomach isn't tied into knots and my whole world hasn't turned upside down for the second time in a month.

Pretend like I'm okay.

"Let's bring your suitcases up to your room and get you unpacked. It'll help you relax."

Macy climbs off the snowmobile, then takes off her helmet and her hat. It's the first time I've seen her without all the coldweather gear, and I can't help smiling at her rainbow-colored hair. It's cut in a short, choppy style that should be smooshed and plastered to her head after three hours in a helmet, but instead it looks like she just walked out of a salon.

Which matches the rest of her, now that I think about it, considering her whole coordinating jacket, boots, and snow pants look kind of shouts cover model for some Alaskan wilderness fashion magazine.

On the other hand, I'm pretty sure my look says I've gone a couple of rounds with a pissed-off caribou. And lost. Badly. Which seems fair, since that's about how I feel.

Macy makes quick work of unloading my suitcases, and this

time I grab two of them. But I only make it a few steps up the very long walk to the castle's imposing front doors before I'm struggling to breathe.

"It's the altitude," Macy says as she takes one of the suitcases out of my hand. "We climbed pretty fast and, since you're coming from sea level, it's going to take a few days for you to get used to how thin the air is up here."

Just the idea of not being able to breathe sets off the beginnings of the panic attack I've barely kept at bay all day. Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath—or as deep as I can out here—and try to fight it back.

In, hold for five seconds, out. In, hold for ten seconds, out. In, hold for five seconds, out. Just like Heather's mom taught me. Dr. Blake is a therapist, and she's been giving me tips on how to deal with the anxiety I've been having since my parents died. But I'm not sure her tips are up to combatting all this any more than I am.

Still, I can't stand here frozen forever, like one of the gargoyles staring down at me. Especially not when I can feel Macy's concern even with my eyes closed.

I take one more deep breath and open my eyes again, shooting my cousin a smile I'm far from feeling. "Fake it till you make it is still a thing, right?"

"It's going to be okay," she tells me, her own eyes wide with sympathy. "Just stand there and catch your breath. I'll carry your suitcases up to the door."

"I can do it."

"Seriously, it's okay. Just chill for a minute." She holds up her hand in the universal *stop* gesture. "We're not in any hurry."

Her tone begs me not to argue, so I don't. Especially since the panic attack I'm trying to fend off is only making it harder to breathe. Instead, I nod and watch as she carries my suitcasesone at a time—up to the school's front door.

As I do, a flash of color way above us catches my eye.

It's there and gone so fast that even as I scan for it, I can't be sure it ever really existed to begin with. Except—there it is again. A flash of red in the lit window of the tallest tower.

I don't know who it is or why they even matter, but I stop where I am. Watching. Waiting. Wondering if whoever it is will make another appearance.

It isn't long before they do.

I can't see clearly—distance, darkness, and the distorted glass of the windows cover up a lot—but I get the impression of a strong jaw, shaggy dark hair, a red jacket against a background of light.

It's not much, and there's no reason for it to have caught my attention—certainly no reason for it to have *held* my attention—and yet I find myself staring up at the window so long that Macy has all three of my suitcases at the top of the stairs before I even realize it.

"Ready to try again?" she calls down from her spot near the front doors.

"Oh, yeah. Of course." I start up the last thirty or so steps, ignoring the way my head is spinning. Altitude sickness—one more thing I never had to worry about in San Diego.

Fantastic.

I glance up at the window one last time, not surprised at all to find that whoever was looking down at me is long gone. Still, an inexplicable shiver of disappointment works its way through me. It makes no sense, though, so I shrug it off. I have bigger things to worry about right now.

"This place is unbelievable," I tell my cousin as she pushes open one of the doors and we walk inside.

And holy crap—I thought the whole castle thing with its

pointed archways and elaborate stonework was imposing from the outside. Now that I've seen the inside... Now that I've seen the inside, I'm pretty sure I should be curtsying right about now. Or at least bowing and scraping. I mean, wow. Just...wow.

I don't know where to look first—at the high ceiling with its elaborate black crystal chandelier or the roaring fireplace that dominates the whole right wall of the foyer.

In the end I go with the fireplace, because *heat*. And because it's freaking gorgeous, the mantel around it an intricate pattern of stone and stained glass that reflects the light of the flames through the whole room.

"Pretty cool, huh?" Macy says with a grin as she comes up behind me.

"Totally cool," I agree. "This place is..."

"Magic. I know." She wiggles her brows at me. "Want to see some more?"

I really do. I'm still far from sold on the Alaskan boarding school thing, but that doesn't mean I don't want to check out the castle. I mean, it's a *castle*, complete with stone walls and elaborate tapestries I can't help but want to stop and look at as we make our way through the entryway into some kind of common room.

The only problem is that the deeper we move into the school, the more students we come across. Some are standing around in scattered clumps, talking and laughing, while others are seated at several of the room's scarred wooden tables, leaning over books or phones or laptop screens. In the back corner of one room, sprawled out on several antique-looking couches in varying hues of red and gold, is a group of six guys playing Xbox on a huge TV, while a few other students crowd around to watch.

Only, as we get closer, I realize they aren't watching the video game. Or their books. Or even their phones. Instead, they're all

looking at *me* as Macy leads—and by leads, I mean parades—me through the center of the room.

My stomach clenches, and I duck my head to hide my very obvious discomfort. I get that everyone wants to check out the new girl—especially when she's the headmaster's niece—but understanding doesn't make it any easier to bear the scrutiny from a bunch of strangers. Especially since I'm pretty sure I have the worst case of helmet hair ever recorded.

I'm too busy avoiding eye contact and regulating my breathing to talk as we make our way through the room, but as we exit into a long, winding hallway, I finally tell Macy, "I can't believe you go to school here."

"We both go to school here," she reminds me with a quick grin.

"Yeah, but..." I just got here. And I've never felt more out of place in my life.

"But?" she repeats, eyebrows arched.

"It's a lot." I eye the gorgeous stained glass windows that run along the exterior wall and the elaborate carved molding that decorates the arched ceiling.

"It is." She slows down until I catch up. "But it's home."

"Your home," I whisper, doing my best not to think of the house I left behind, where my mother's front porch wind chimes and whirligigs were the most wild-and-crazy thing about it.

"Our home," she answers as she pulls out her phone and sends a quick text. "You'll see. Speaking of which, my dad wants me to give you a choice about what kind of room situation you want."

"Room situation?" I repeat, glancing around the castle while images of ghosts and animated suits of armor slide through my head.

"Well, all the single rooms have been assigned for this term. Dad told me we could move some people around to get you one, but I really hoped you might want to room with me instead." She smiles hopefully for a second, but it quickly fades as she continues. "I mean, I totally get that you might need some space to yourself right now after..."

And there's that fade-out again. It gets to me, just like it does every time. Usually, I ignore it, but this time I can't stop myself from asking, "After what?"

Just this once, I want someone else to say it. Maybe then it will feel more real and less like a nightmare.

Except as Macy gasps and turns the color of the snow outside, I realize it's not going to be her. And that it's unfair of me to expect it to be.

"I'm sorry," she whispers, and now it almost looks like she's going to cry, which, no. Just no. We're not going to go there. Not when the only thing currently holding me together is a snarky attitude and my ability to compartmentalize.

No way am I going to risk losing my grip on either. Not here, in front of my cousin and anybody else who might happen to pass by. And not now, when it's obvious from all the stares that I'm totally the newest attraction at the zoo.

So instead of melting into Macy for the hug I so desperately need, instead of letting myself think about how much I miss home and my parents and my *life*, I pull back and give her the best smile I can manage. "Why don't you show me to *our* room?"

The concern in her eyes doesn't diminish, but the sunshine definitely makes another appearance. "Our room? Really?"

I sigh deep inside and kiss my dream of a little peaceful solitude goodbye. It's not as hard as it should be, but then I've lost a lot more in the last month than my own space. "Really. Rooming with you sounds perfect."

I've already upset her once, which is so not my style. Neither is getting someone kicked out of their room. Besides being rude and smacking of nepotism, it also seems like a surefire way to piss people off—something that is definitely not on my to-do list right now.

"Awesome!" Macy grins and throws her arms around me for a fast but powerful hug. Then she glances at her phone with a roll of her eyes. "Dad still hasn't answered my text—he's the worst about checking his phone. Why don't you hang out here, and I'll go get him? I know he wanted to see you as soon as we arrived."

"I can come with you-"

"Please just sit, Grace." She points at the ornate Frenchprovincial-style chairs that flank a small chess table in an alcove to the right of the staircase. "I'm sure you're exhausted and I've got this, honest. Relax a minute while I get Dad."

Because she's right—my head is aching and my chest still feels tight—I just nod and plop down in the closest chair. I'm beyond tired and want nothing more than to lean my head back against the chair and close my eyes for a minute. But I'm afraid I'll fall asleep if I do. And no way am I running the risk of being the girl caught drooling all over herself in the hallway on her very first day...or ever, for that matter.

More to keep myself from drifting off than out of actual interest, I pick up one of the chess pieces in front of me. It's made of intricately carved stone, and my eyes widen as I realize what I'm looking at. A perfect rendition of a vampire, right down to the black cape, frightening snarl, and bared fangs. It matches the Gothic castle vibe so well that I can't help being amused. Plus, it's gorgeously crafted.

Intrigued now, I reach for a piece from the other side. And nearly laugh out loud when I realize it's a dragon—fierce, regal, with giant wings. It's absolutely beautiful.

The whole set is.

I put the piece down only to pick up another dragon. This one is less fierce, but with its sleepy eyes and folded wings, it's even more intricate. I look it over carefully, fascinated with the level of detail in the piece—everything from the perfect points on the wings to the careful curl of each talon reflects just how much care the artist put into the piece. I've never been a chess girl, but this set just might change my mind about the game.

When I put down this dragon piece, I go to the other side of the board and pick up the vampire queen. She's beautiful, with long, flowing hair and an elaborately decorated cape.

"I'd be careful with that one if I were you. She's got a nasty bite." The words are low and rumbly and so close that I nearly fall out of my chair. Instead, I jump up, plopping the chess piece down with a clatter, then whirl around—heart pounding—only to find myself face-to-face with the most intimidating guy I've ever seen. And not just because he's hot…although he's definitely that.

Still, there's something more to him, something different and powerful and overwhelming, though I don't have a clue what it is. I mean, sure. He has the kind of face nineteenth-century poets loved to write about—too intense to be beautiful and too striking to be anything else.

Skyscraper cheekbones.

Full red lips.

A jaw so sharp it could cut stone.

Smooth, alabaster skin.

And his eyes...a bottomless obsidian that see everything and show nothing, surrounded by the longest, most obscene lashes I've ever seen.

And even worse, those all-knowing eyes are laser-focused on me right now, and I'm suddenly terrified that he can see all the things I've worked so hard and so long to hide. I try to duck my head, try to yank my gaze from his, but I can't. I'm trapped by his stare, hypnotized by the sheer magnetism rolling off him in waves.

I swallow hard to catch my breath.

It doesn't work.

And now he's grinning, one corner of his mouth turning up in a crooked little smile that I feel in every single cell. Which only makes it worse, because that smirk says he knows exactly what kind of effect he's having on me. And, worse, that he's enjoying it.

Annoyance flashes through me at the realization, melting the numbness that's surrounded me since my parents' deaths. Waking me from the stupor that's the only thing that's kept me from screaming all day, every day, at the unfairness of it all. At the pain and horror and helplessness that have taken over my whole life.

It's not a good feeling. And the fact that it's this guy—with the smirk and the face and the cold eyes that refuse to relinquish their hold on me even as they demand that I don't look too closely—just pisses me off more.

It's that anger that finally gives me the strength to break free of his gaze. I rip my eyes away, then search desperately for something else—anything else—to focus on.

Unfortunately, he's standing right in front of me, so close that he's blocking my view of anything else.

Determined to avoid his eyes, I look anywhere but. And land instead on his long, lean body. Then really wish I hadn't, because the black jeans and T-shirt he's wearing only emphasize his flat stomach and hard, well-defined biceps. Not to mention the double-wide shoulders that are absolutely responsible for blocking my view in the first place.

Add in the thick, dark hair that's worn a little too long, so that it falls forward into his face and skims low across his insane cheekbones, and there's nothing to do but give in. Nothing to do but admit that—obnoxious smirk or not—this boy is sexy as hell.

A little wicked, a lot wild, and all dangerous.

What little oxygen I've been able to pull into my lungs in this high altitude completely disappears with the realization. Which only makes me madder. Because, seriously. When exactly did I become the heroine in some YA romance? The new girl swooning over the hottest, most unattainable boy in school?

Gross. And so not happening.

Determined to nip whatever this is in the bud, I force myself

to look at his face again. This time, as our gazes meet and clash, I realize that it doesn't matter if I'm acting like some giant romantic cliché.

Because he isn't.

0 1 1

One glance and I know that this dark boy with the closed-off eyes and the fuck-you attitude isn't the hero of anyone's story. Least of all mine.

Vampire Queens Aren't the Only Ones with a Nasty Bite

etermined not to let this staring contest that feels a little like a show of dominance go on any longer, I cast around for something to break the tension. And settle on a response to the only thing he's actually said to me so far.

"Who's got a nasty bite?"

He reaches past me and picks up the piece I dropped, holds the queen for me to see. "She's really not very nice."

I stare at him. "She's a chess piece."

His obsidian eyes gleam back. "Your point?"

"My point is, she's a *chess* piece. She's made of *marble*. She can't bite anyone."

He inclines his head in a *you never know* gesture. "There are more things in heaven and hell, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

"Earth," I correct before I can think better of it.

He crooks one midnight-black brow in question, so I continue. "The quote is, 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio."

"Is it now?" His face doesn't change, but there's something mocking in his tone that wasn't there before, like I'm the one who

made the mistake, not him. But I know I'm right—my AP English class just finished reading *Hamlet* last month, and my teacher spent forever on that quote. "I think I like my version better."

"Even though it's wrong?"

"Especially because it's wrong."

I have no idea what I'm supposed to say to that, so I just shake my head. And wonder how lost I'll get if I go looking for Macy and Uncle Finn right now. Probably very, considering the size of this place, but I'm beginning to think I should risk it. Because the longer I stand here, the more I realize this guy is as terrifying as he is intriguing.

I'm not sure which is worse. And I'm growing less sure by the second that I want to find out.

"I need to go." I force the words past a jaw I didn't even know I'd been clenching.

"Yeah, you do." He takes a small step back, nods toward the common room Macy and I just walked through. "The door's that way."

It's not the response I'm expecting, and it throws me off guard. "So what, I shouldn't let it hit me on the way out?"

He shrugs. "As long as you leave this school, it doesn't matter to me if it hits you or not. I warned your uncle you wouldn't be safe here, but he obviously doesn't like you much."

Anger flashes through me at his words, burning away the last of the numbness that has plagued me. "Who exactly are you supposed to be anyway? Katmere's very own unwelcome wagon?"

"Unwelcome wagon?" His tone is as obnoxious as his face.

"Believe me, this is the nicest greeting you're going to get here."

"This is it, huh?" I raise my brows, spread my arms out wide. "The big welcome to Alaska?"

"More like, welcome to hell. Now get the fuck out."

The last is said in a snarl that yanks my heart into my throat.

But it also slams my temper straight into the stratosphere. "Is it that stick up your ass that makes you such a jerk?" I demand. "Or is this just your regular, charming personality?"

The words come out fast and furious, before I even know I'm going to say them. But once they're out, I don't regret them. How can I when shock flits across his face, finally erasing that annoying smirk of his?

At least for a minute. Then he fires back, "I've got to say, if that's the best you've got, I give you about an hour."

I know I shouldn't ask, but he looks so smug, I can't help myself. "Before what?"

"Before something eats you." He doesn't say it, but the *obviously* is definitely implied. Which only pisses me off more.

"Seriously? That's what you decided to go with?" I roll my eyes. "Bite me, dude."

"Nah, I don't think so." He looks me up and down. "I'm pretty sure you wouldn't even make an appetizer."

But then he's stepping closer, leaning down until he's all but whispering in my ear. "Maybe a quick snack, though." His teeth close with a loud, sharp snap that makes me jump and shiver all at the same time.

Which I hate...so, so much.

I glance around us, curious if anyone else is witnessing this mess. But where everyone only had eyes for me earlier, they seem to be going out of their way not to glance in my direction now. One lanky boy with thick red hair even keeps his head so awkwardly turned to the side while walking across the room that he almost runs into another student.

Which tells me everything I need to know about this guy.

Determined to regain control of the situation—and myself—I take a big step back. Then, ignoring my pounding heart and the pterodactyls flapping around in my stomach, I demand, "What

is wrong with you?" I mean, seriously. He's got the manners of a rabid polar bear.

"Got a century or three?" His smirk is back—he's obviously proud of getting to me—and for a moment, just a moment, I think about how satisfying it would be to punch him right in the center of that annoying mouth of his.

"You know what? You really don't have to be such a—"

"Don't tell me what I have to be. Not when you don't have a clue what you've wandered into here."

"Oh no!" I do a mock-afraid face. "Is this the part of the story where you tell me about the big, bad monsters out here in the big, bad Alaskan wilderness?"

"No, this is the part of the story where I show you the big, bad monsters right here in this castle." He steps forward, closing the small distance I managed to put between us.

And there goes my heart again, beating like a caged bird desperate to escape.

I hate it.

I hate that he's bested me, and I hate that being this close to him makes me feel a bunch of things I shouldn't for a guy who has been a total jerk to me. I hate even more that the look in his eyes says he knows exactly how I'm feeling.

The fact that I'm reacting so strongly to him when all he seems to feel for me is contempt is humiliating, so I take one trembling step back. Then I take another. And another.

But he follows suit, moving one step forward for every step I take backward, until I'm caught between him and the chess table pressing into the back of my thighs. And even though there's nowhere to go, even though I'm stuck right here in front of him, he leans closer still, gets closer still, until I can feel his warm breath on my cheek and the brush of his silky black hair against my skin.

"What are-?" What little breath I've managed to recover

catches in my throat. "What are you doing?" I demand as he reaches past me.

He doesn't answer at first. But when he pulls away, he's got one of the dragon pieces in his hand. He holds it up for me to see, that single eyebrow of his arched provocatively, and answers. "You're the one who wanted to see the monsters."

This one is fierce, eyes narrowed, talons raised, mouth open to show off sharp, jagged teeth. But it's still just a chess piece. "I'm not afraid of a three-inch dragon."

"Yeah, well, you should be."

"Yeah, well, I'm *not*." The words come out more strangled than I intend, because he may have taken a step back, but he's still standing too close. So close that I can feel his breath on my cheek and the warmth radiating from his body. So close that one deep breath will end with my chest pressing against his.

The thought sets off a whole new kaleidoscope of butterflies deep inside me. I can't move back any farther, but I can *lean* back over the table a little. Which I do—all while those dark, fathomless eyes of his watch my every move.

Silence stretches between us for one...ten...twenty-five seconds before he finally asks, "So if you aren't afraid of things that go bump in the night, what *are* you afraid of?"

Images of my parents' mangled car flash through my brain, followed by pictures of their battered bodies. I was the only family they had in San Diego—or anywhere, really, except for Finn and Macy—so I'm the one who had to go to the morgue. I'm the one who had to identify their bodies. Who had to see them all bruised and bloody and broken before the funeral home had a chance to put them back together again.

The familiar anguish wells up inside me, but I do what I've been doing for weeks now. I shove it back down. Pretend it doesn't exist. "Not much," I tell him as flippantly as I can

manage. "There's not much to be afraid of when you've already lost everything that matters."

He freezes at my words, his whole body tensing up so much that it feels like he might shatter. Even his eyes change, the wildness disappearing between one blink and the next until only stillness remains.

Stillness and an agony so deep I can barely see it behind the layers and layers of defenses he's erected.

But I can see it. More, I can feel it calling to my own pain.

It's an awful and awe-inspiring feeling at the same time. So awful I can barely stand it. So awe-inspiring that I can't stop it.

So I don't. And neither does he.

Instead, we stand there, frozen. Devasted. Connected in a way I can feel but can't comprehend by our very separate horrors.

I don't know how long we stay like that, staring into each other's eyes. Acknowledging each other's pain because we can't acknowledge our own.

Long enough for the animosity to drain right out of me.

Long enough for me to see the silver flecks in the midnight of his eyes—distant stars shining through the darkness he makes no attempt to hide.

More than long enough for me to get my rampaging heart under control. At least until he reaches out and gently takes hold of one of my million curls.

And just that easily, I forget how to breathe again.

Heat slams through me as he stretches out the curl, warming me up for the first time since I opened the door of Philip's plane in Healy. It's confusing and overwhelming and I don't have a clue what to do about it.

Five minutes ago, this guy was being a total douche to me. And now...now I don't know anything. Except that I need space. And to sleep. And a chance to just breathe for a few minutes.

With that in mind, I bring my hands up and push at his shoulders in an effort to get him to give me a little room. But it's like pushing a wall of granite. He doesn't budge.

At least not until I whisper, "Please."

He waits a second longer, maybe two or three—until my head is muddled and my hands are shaking—before he finally takes a step back and lets the curl go.

As he does, he sweeps a hand through his dark hair. His longish bangs part just enough to reveal a jagged scar from the center of his left eyebrow to the left corner of his mouth. It's thin and white, barely noticeable against the paleness of his skin, but it's there nonetheless—especially if you look at the wicked vee it causes at the end of his dark eyebrow.

It should make him less attractive, should do something—anything—to negate the incredible power of his looks. But somehow the scar only emphasizes the danger, turning him from just another pretty boy with angelic looks into someone a million times more compelling. A fallen angel with a bad-boy vibe for miles...and a million stories to back that vibe up.

Combined with the anguish I just felt inside him, it makes him more...human. More relatable and more devastating, despite the darkness that rolls off him in waves. A scar like this only comes from an unimaginable injury. Hundreds of stitches, multiple operations, months—maybe even years—of recovery. I hate that he suffered like that, wouldn't wish it on anyone, let alone this boy who frustrates and terrifies and excites me all at the same time.

He knows I noticed the scar—I can see it in the way his eyes narrow. In the way his shoulders stiffen and his hands clench into fists. In the way he ducks his head so that his hair falls over his cheek again.

I hate that, hate that he thinks he has to hide something that he should wear as a badge of honor. It takes a lot of strength to I reach out before I make a conscious decision to do so, cup his scarred cheek in my hand.

His dark eyes blaze, and I think he's going to shove me away. But in the end, he doesn't. He just stands there and lets me stroke my thumb back and forth across his cheek—across his scar—for several long moments.

"I'm sorry," I whisper when I can finally get my voice past the painful lump of sympathy in my throat. "This must have hurt horribly."

He doesn't answer. Instead, he closes his eyes, sinks into my palm, takes one long, shuddering breath.

Then he's pulling back, stepping away, putting real distance between us for the first time since he snuck up behind me, which suddenly feels like a lifetime ago.

"I don't understand you," he tells me suddenly, his blackmagic voice so quiet that I have to strain to hear him.

"There are more things in heaven and hell, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy," I answer, deliberately using his earlier misquote.

He shakes his head as if trying to clear it. Takes a deep breath, then blows it out slowly. "If you won't leave—"

"I can't leave," I interject. "I have nowhere else to go. My parents—"

"Are dead. I know." He smiles grimly. "Fine. If you're not going to leave, then you need to listen to me very, very carefully."

"What do you-?"

"Keep your head down. Don't look too closely at anyone or anything." He leans forward, his voice dropping to a low rumble as he finishes. "And always, *always* watch your back."

Shining Armor Is So Last Century

race!" My uncle Finn's voice booms down the hallway, and I turn toward him instinctively. I smile and give him a little wave even though there's a part of me that feels frozen in place after being on the receiving end of what sounds an awful lot like a warning.

I turn back to confront Mr. Tall, Dark, and Surly, to figure out exactly what it is he thinks I need to be so afraid of—but he's gone.

I glance around, determined to figure out where he went, but before I can spot him, Uncle Finn is wrapping me in a huge bear hug and lifting me off my feet. I hang on for dear life, letting the comforting scent of him—the same woodsy scent my dad used to have—wash over me.

"I'm so sorry I couldn't meet you at the airport. A couple of kids got hurt, and I had to take care of things here."

"Don't worry about it. Are they okay?"

"They're fine." He shakes his head. "Just a couple of idiots being idiots. You know how boys are."

I start to tell him that I have no idea how boys are—my last encounter is proof of that—but some weird instinct I don't

understand warns me not to bring up the guy I was just talking to. So I don't. Instead, I laugh and nod along.

"Enough about the duties of a headmaster," he says, pulling me in for another, quicker hug before leaning back to study my face. "How was your trip? And more importantly, how are you?"

"It was long," I tell him. "But it was fine. And I'm okay." The phrase of the day.

"I'm pretty sure 'okay' is a bit of an overstatement." He sighs. "I can only imagine how hard the last few weeks have been for you. I wish I could have stayed longer after the funeral."

"It's fine. The estate company you called took care of almost everything. And Heather and her mom took care of the rest. I swear."

It's obvious that he wants to say more but just as obvious that he doesn't want to get into anything too deep in the middle of the hallway. So in the end, he just nods and says, "Okay, then. I'll leave you to settle in with Macy. But come see me tomorrow morning, and we'll talk about your schedule. Plus, I'll introduce you to our counselor, Dr. Wainwright. I think you'll like her."

Right. Dr. Wainwright. The school counselor who is also a therapist, according to Heather's mom. And not just any therapist. *My* therapist, apparently, since she and my uncle both think I need one. I would argue, but since I've had to work really hard not to cry in the shower every morning for the last month, I figure they might be on to something.

"Okay, sure."

"Are you hungry? I'll have dinner sent up, since you missed it. And there's something we really need to discuss." He narrows his eyes at me, looks me over. "Although...how are you doing with the altitude?"

"I'm okay. Not great, but okay."

"Yeah." He looks me up and down, then harrumphs

sympathetically before turning to Macy. "Make sure she takes a couple of Advil when she gets to your room. And that she drinks plenty of water. I'll send up some soup and ginger ale. Let's keep things light tonight, see how you're doing in the morning."

"Light" sounds perfect, since even the thought of eating right now makes me want to throw up. "Okay, sure."

"I'm glad you're here, Grace. And I promise, things will get easier."

I nod, because what else am I going to do? I'm not glad I'm here—Alaska feels like the moon right now—but I'm all for things getting easier. I just want to go one day without feeling like shit.

I was hoping tomorrow would be it, but since I met Tall, Dark, and Surly, all I can think about is the way he looked when he told me to leave Katmere. And the way he glowered when I refused. So...probably not.

Figuring we're done here, I reach for the handle of one of my suitcases. But my uncle says, "Don't worry about those. I'll get one of the guys to—" He breaks off and calls down the hallway. "Hey, Flint! Come here and give me a hand, will you?"

Macy makes a sound halfway between a groan and a death rattle as her father starts down the corridor, presumably trying to catch up with this Flint person.

"Come on, let's go before Dad chases him down." She grabs two of my suitcases and practically runs for the stairs.

"What's wrong with Flint?" I ask as I grab my last remaining suitcase and try to keep up with her.

"Nothing! He's great. Amazing. Also, superhot. He doesn't need to see us like this."

I can see how she could think he doesn't need to see *me* like this, since I'm pretty sure I look half dead. But, "You look great."

"Um, no. No, I don't. Now, come on. Let's get out of-"

"Hey, Mace. Don't worry about those suitcases. I'll get them for you." A deep voice booms from several steps below us, and I turn around just in time to see a guy in ripped jeans and a white T-shirt charging toward me. He's tall—like, nearly as tall as Tall, Dark, and Surly-and just as muscular. But that's where the resemblance ends, because everywhere that other guy was dark and cold, this one is light and fire.

Bright-amber eyes that seem to burn from within.

Warm brown skin.

Black afro that looks amazing on him.

And perhaps most interesting of all, there's a smile in his eyes that is as different from the other guy's iciness as the stars just outside the windows are from the endless midnight blue of the sky.

"We've got them," Macy says, but he ignores her, bounding up the stairs three at a time.

He stops next to me first, gently eases the handle of my suitcase from the near death grip I've got on it. "Hey there, New Girl. How are you?"

"I'm okay, just..."

"She's sick, Flint," my uncle calls from below. "The altitude is getting to her."

"Oh, right." His eyes blaze with sympathy. "That sucks."

"A little bit, yeah."

"Well, come on then, New Girl. Climb on my back. I'll give you a ride up the stairs."

Just the idea has my stomach revolting even more. "Uh, what? N-No, that's okay." I back away from him a little. "I can walk—"

"Come on." He bends his knees to make it easier for me to grab on to his super-broad shoulders. "You've got a long three flights ahead of you."

They are a long three flights, and still I would seriously rather

die than climb on a random stranger's back. "Pretty sure they'll be longer for you if you're carrying me."

"Nah. You're so little, I won't even notice. Now, are you going to get on or am I going to pick you up and toss you over my shoulder?"

"You wouldn't," I tell him.

"Try me," he says with an endearing grin that makes me laugh.

But I'm still not getting on his back. No way is one of the hottest guys at the school going to carry me up these stairs—on his back or over his shoulder. No. Freaking. Way. I don't care how much the altitude is bothering me.

"Thanks for the offer. Really." I give him the best smile I can manage right now. "But I think I'm just going to walk slowly. I'll be fine."

Flint shakes his head. "Stubborn much?" But he doesn't push the issue the way I'm afraid he will. Instead, he asks, "Can I at least help you up the stairs? I'd hate to see you fall down a flight or two on your very first day."

"Help how?" Suspicion has me narrowing my eyes at him.

"Like this." He slides his arm around my waist.

I stiffen at the unexpected contact. "What are you—?"

"This way you can at least lean on me if the steps get to be too much. Deal?"

I start to say *absolutely no deal*, but the laughter in his brightamber eyes as he looks down at me—expecting me to do just that—has me changing my mind. Well, that and the fact that Uncle Finn and Macy both seem totally fine with the whole thing.

"Okay, fine. Deal," I say with a sigh as the room starts to spin around me. "I'm Grace, by the way."

"Yeah, I know. Foster told us you were coming." He heads toward the stairs, propelling me along with his right arm across my back. "And I'm Flint."

He pauses at the foot of the stairs for a moment, reaching for my bags.

"Oh, don't worry about the suitcases," Macy says, her voice about three octaves higher than it normally is. "I can get them."

"No doubt, Mace." He winks at her. "But you might as well use me if I'm volunteering." Then he grabs two of the bags in his left hand and heads up the stairs.

We start out going slowly, thankfully, as I'm struggling to breathe after only a few steps. But before long, we're moving fast—not because I've gotten used to the altitude but because Flint has taken on most of my weight and is basically carrying me up the stairs with an arm around my waist.

I know he's strong—all those muscles under his shirt definitely aren't for show—but I can't believe he's *this* strong. I mean, he's carrying two heavy bags *and* me up the stairs, and he isn't even breathing hard.

We end up beating Macy, who is huffing and puffing her way up the final few steps with my last bag, to the top.

"You can let me down now," I tell him as I start to squirm away. "Since you pretty much carried me anyway."

"Just trying to help," he says with a wiggle of his eyebrows that has me laughing despite my embarrassment.

He lets me down, and I expect him to pull away when my feet are finally back on the ground. Instead, he keeps his arm around my waist and moves me across the landing.

"You can let go," I say again. "I'm fine now." But my knees wobble as I say it, another wave of dizziness moving through me.

I try to hide it, but I must do a bad job because the look Flint is giving me goes from amused to concerned in the space of two seconds flat. Then he shakes his head. "Yeah, until you pass out and pitch over the railing. Nope, Headmaster Foster put me in charge of getting you to your room safely and that is what I'm going to do."

I start to argue, but I'm feeling just unsteady enough that I decide accepting his help might actually be the better part of valor. So I just nod as he turns around and calls to my cousin, "You okay there, Mace?"

"Just great," she gasps, all but dragging my suitcase across the landing.

"Told you I could have taken it," Flint says to her.

"It's not the weight of the suitcase," she snipes back. "It's how fast I had to carry it."

"I've got longer legs." He glances around. "So, which hallway am I taking her to?"

"We're in the North wing," Macy says, pointing to the hallway directly to our left. "Follow me."

Despite all her huffing and puffing, she takes off at a near run, with Flint and me hot on her heels. As we race across the landing, I can't help but be grateful for the supporting arm he's still lending me. I've always thought I was in pretty good shape, but life in Alaska obviously takes fit to a whole new level.

There are four sets of double doors surrounding the landing—all heavy, carved wood—and Macy stops at the set marked North. But before she can reach for the handle, the door flies open so fast that she barely manages to jump back before it hits her.

"Hey, what was that ab—" She breaks off when four guys walk through the door like she's not even there. All four are brooding and sexy as all get out, but I've only got eyes for one of them.

The one from downstairs.

He doesn't have eyes for me, though. Instead, he walks right by—face blank and gaze glacier cold—like I'm not even here.

Like he doesn't even see me, even though he has to skirt me to get by.

Like he didn't just spend fifteen minutes talking to me earlier.

Just because I'm angry, I assure myself. Just because I want the chance to tell him off for having disappeared like that.

Macy doesn't say anything to him, or the other guys, and neither does Flint. Instead, they wait for them to be out of the way and then head down the hallway like nothing happened. Like we didn't just get blatantly snubbed.

Flint tightens his warm arm around my waist, and I can't help but wonder why the guy with ice in his veins makes my skin tingle and the one literally lending me his warmth leaves me cold. Looks like my messed-up life is totally messing with my brain as well...

I want to ask who they are—want to ask who he is so I finally have a name to go with his insane body and even more insane face—but now doesn't feel like the time. So I keep my mouth shut and concentrate on looking around instead of obsessing over some guy I don't even like.

The North hallway is lined with heavy wooden doors on both sides, most with some kind of decoration hanging on them. Dried roses in the shape of an X on one, what looks to be an elaborate set of wind chimes on another, and a ton of bat stickers all over a third. I can't decide if the person living there has dreams of being a chiropterologist or if they are simply a fan of Batman.

Either way, I'm absurdly fascinated by all the decorations—especially the wind chimes, as I can't imagine there's much wind in an indoor hallway—and not at all surprised when Macy stops at the most elaborately adorned door of them all. A garland of

fresh flowers winds its way around the doorframe, and lines of threaded, multicolored crystals fall from the top of the door to the bottom in a fancy kind of beaded curtain.

"Here we are," Macy says as she throws the door open with

a flourish. "Home sweet home."

Before I can take a step over the threshold, another hot guy

dressed entirely in black passes by. And though he pays us no more attention than any of the others did at the North hallway door, the hair on the back of my neck stands up. Because even though I'm sure I'm imagining things, it suddenly feels an awful lot like I'm being watched.

Things Hot Pink and Harry Styles Have in Common

hich bed is hers?" Flint asks as he propels me over the threshold.

"The one on the right," Macy answers. Her voice is back to sounding funny, so I glance over my shoulder to make sure she's okay.

She looks fine, but her eyes are huge, and they keep darting from Flint to the rest of the room and back again. I give her a what's up look, but she just shakes her head in the universal sign for don't say ANYTHING. So I don't.

Instead, I look around the room I'm going to share with my cousin for the next several months. It takes only a couple of seconds for me to figure out that no matter what she said about being okay with me having my own room, she had planned on me rooming with her all along.

For starters, all her possessions are arranged neatly on one rainbow-colored side of the room. And for another, the spare bed is already made up in—of course—hot-pink sheets and a hot-pink comforter with huge white hibiscus flowers all over it.

"I know you like surfing," she says, watching me eye the blindingly bright comforter. "I thought you might like something that reminds you of home."

That shade of pink reminds me of surfer Barbie more than it reminds me of home, but no way am I going to say that to her. Not when it's obvious she's gone out of her way to make me feel comfortable. I appreciate she cared enough to try. "Thanks. It's really nice."

"It's definitely cheerful," Flint says as he helps me to the bed. The look he gives me is totally tongue-in-cheek, but that only makes me like him more. The fact that he realizes how absurd Macy's decorating choices are but is way too nice to say anything that might hurt her feelings totally works for me. If I'm lucky, maybe I've made another friend.

He drops my suitcases at the foot of the bed, then steps back as I sink onto my mattress, my head still spinning a little.

"Do you guys need anything else before I head out?" Flint asks after we are completely disentangled.

"I'm good," I tell him. "Thanks for the help."

"Any time, New Girl." He flashes me a ten-thousand-kilowatt smile. "Anytime." I'm pretty sure Macy whimpers a little at the sight of that

grin, but she doesn't say anything. Just kind of walks to the door and smiles weakly as she waits for him to leave. Which he does with a little wave for me and a fist bump for her on his way out.

The second the door is closed, and locked, behind him, I say, "You've got a crush on Flint."

"I don't!" she answers, looking wildly at the door, like he can hear us through the thick wood.

"Oh yeah? Then what was all that about?"

"All what?" Her voice is about three octaves too high.

"You know." I wring my hands, bat my lashes, give a halfwaydecent imitation of the sounds she's been making since her father flagged down Flint for help. "You totally sound like that," I tell her. "But I don't get it. If you like him, why didn't you try to talk to him more? I mean, it was, like, a perfect opportunity."

"I don't *like* him like him. I don't!" she insists with a laugh when I give her a look. "I mean, yeah, he's gorgeous and nice and supersmart, but I've got a boyfriend who I really care about. It's just, Flint is so... Flint. You know? And he was in our room, next to your bed." She sighs. "The mind boggles."

"Don't you mean swoons?" I tease.

"Whatever." She rolls her eyes. "It's not a real crush. It's more like..."

"More like the aura surrounding the most popular boy in school?"

"Yes, that! Exactly that. Except Flint's not quite that high on the list. Jaxon and his group have the top positions pretty much sewn up."

"Jaxon?" I ask, trying to sound casual even as my whole body goes on high alert. I don't know how I know she's talking about him, but I do. "Who's Jaxon?"

"Jaxon Vega." She fake swoons. "I have *no* idea how to explain Jaxon, except... Oh, wait! You saw him."

"I did?" I try to ignore the way flying dinosaurs have once again taken up residence in my stomach.

"Yeah, on the way to our room. He was one of the guys who nearly hit me in the face with the door. The really hot one out in front."

I play dumb even though my heart is suddenly beating way too fast. "You mean the ones who completely ignored us?"

"Yeah." She laughs. "Don't take it personally, though. That's just the way Jaxon is. He's...angsty."

He's a lot more than angsty, if our conversation a little while

ago is anything to go by. But I'm not about to bring up what happened to Macy when I don't even know how I feel about it yet.

So I do the only thing I can do. I change the subject. "Thanks so much for setting up the room for me. I appreciate it."

"Oh, don't worry about it." She waves it away. "It was no big deal."

"I'm pretty sure it was a big deal. I don't know that many companies that deliver ninety minutes outside of Healy, Alaska."

She blushes a little and looks away, like she doesn't want me to know just how much trouble she's gone through to make me feel at home. But then she shrugs and says, "Yeah, well, my dad knows all the ones that do. It wasn't a problem."

"Still, you're totally my favorite cousin."
She rolls her eyes. "I'm your only cousin."

"Doesn't mean you aren't also my favorite."

"My dad uses that line."

"That you're his favorite cousin?" I tease.

"You know what I mean." She sighs in obvious exasperation.

"You're a dork; you know that, right?"

"I absolutely do, yes."

She laughs, even as she crosses to the mini fridge next to her desk. "Here, drink this," she says as she pulls out a large bottle of water and tosses it to me. "And I'll show you the rest."

"The rest?"

"Yeah. There's more." She crosses to one of the closets and pulls open the doors. "I figured your wardrobe wasn't exactly equipped for Alaska, so I supplemented a little."

"A little is an understatement, don't you think?"

Lined up inside the closet are several black skirts and pants, along with white and black blouses, a bunch of black or purple polo shirts, two black blazers, and two red and black plaid scarves. There are also a bunch of lined hoodies, a few thick

sweaters, a heavy jacket, and two more pairs of snow pants—only a few of which are in hot pink, thankfully. On the floor are a few pairs of new shoes and snow boots, along with a large box of what looks like books and school supplies.

"There are socks and thermal underwear and some fleece shirts and pants in your dresser drawers. I figure moving here is hard enough. I didn't want you to have to worry about anything extra."

And just like that, she manages to knock down the first line of my defenses. Tears bloom in my eyes, and I look away, blinking quickly in an effort to hide what a disaster I am.

It obviously doesn't work, because Macy makes a small exclamation of dismay. She's across the room in the blink of an eye, pulling me into a coconut-scented hug that seems incongruous here at the center of Alaska. It's also strangely comforting.

"It sucks, Grace. The whole thing just totally sucks, and I wish I could make it better. I wish I could just wave a wand and put everything back the way it used to be."

I nod because there's a lump in my throat. And because there's nothing else to say. Except that I wish for that, too.

I wish that the last words my parents and I spoke weren't hurled at each other in a fight that seems so stupid now.

I wish that my dad hadn't lost control of the car two hours later and driven himself and my mother off a cliff, plunging hundreds of feet into the ocean.

Most of all, I wish that I could smell my mother's perfume or hear the deep rumble of my father's voice just one more time.

I let Macy hug me as long as I can stand it—which is only about five seconds or so—and then I pull away. I've never particularly liked being touched, and it's only gotten worse since my parents died.

"Thanks for—" I gesture to the bed and closet. "All of this."

"Of course. And I want you to know, if you ever need to talk or whatever, I'm here. I know it's not the same, because my mom left; she didn't die." She swallows hard, takes a deep breath before continuing. "But I know what it's like to feel alone. And I'm a good listener."

It's the first time she's actually used the word "die." The first time she's actually acknowledged what happened to my parents by name. The fact that she has makes it so much easier to say, "Thank you," and mean it, even as I remember that Jaxon didn't shy away from it, either. He might have been a jackass all the way around, but he called my parents' death what it was. And didn't treat me like I was going to shatter under the weight of one harsh word.

Maybe that's why I'm still thinking about him when I should be writing him off for the jerk he is.

She nods, watching me out of worried eyes that only make me feel worse.

"I should probably get unpacked." I look down at my suitcases with distaste. It feels like I just packed them. The last thing I want to do is empty them right now. Not when my electric-pink bed is calling me like a beacon.

"I can totally help with that." She points at a door across the room. "Why don't you go take a shower and get into your pajamas? I'll check on the soup my dad said he sent up. Then you can eat, take some Advil, and get some rest. Hopefully, when you wake up, you'll be better acclimated to the altitude."

"That sounds..." I really do feel crappy, and a shower sounds amazing. As does sleep, considering I've been so nervous about the move that I haven't gotten much in the last week or so.

"Perfect, right?" She fills in the blank.

"It really does, yeah."

"Good." She walks to her closet and pulls out a couple extra towels. "If you want to hop in the shower, I'll get you some warm soup and hopefully, in half an hour, this whole day will feel a lot better."

"Thanks, Macy." I turn to look at her. "I mean it."

A grin splits her face and lights up her eyes. "You're welcome."

Fifteen minutes later, I'm out of the shower and dressed in my favorite pair of pajamas—a Harry Styles T-shirt from his first solo tour and a pair of blue fleece pants with white and yellow daisies all over them—only to find Macy dancing around the room to "Watermelon Sugar."

Talk about kismet.

Macy oohs and aahs over the concert tee—as she should—but other than that, she pretty much leaves me alone. Except to make sure I drink an entire thirty-two-ounce bottle of water *and* take the Advil she left on my nightstand.

There's a bowl of chicken noodle soup on my nightstand, too, but right now I don't have the energy to eat. Instead, I climb into bed and pull the hot-pink covers over my head.

The last thing I think about before drifting off to sleep is that—despite everything—tonight is the first time I've taken a shower without struggling not to cry since my parents died.

6

No, I Really Don't Want to Build a Snowman

wake up slowly, head fuzzy and body as heavy as stone. It takes me a second to remember where I am—Alaska—and that the light snores that fill the room belong to Macy and not Heather, whose room I crashed in for the last three weeks.

I sit up, trying to ignore the unfamiliar howls and roars—and even the occasional animalistic scream—in the distance. It's enough to freak anyone out, let alone a girl born and raised in the city, but I comfort myself by remembering there's a giant castle wall between me and all the animals making those noises...

Still, if I'm being honest, it isn't the utter foreignness of this place that has my brain racing overtime. Yes, being in Alaska is bizarre on what feels like every level. But once I banish thoughts of my old life, it isn't Alaska that woke me up at—I glance at the clock—3:23 in the morning. And it's not Alaska that's keeping me awake.

It's him.

Jaxon Vega.

I don't know anything more about him than I did when he left me standing in the hallway, angry and confused and hurting more than I want to admit—except that he's the most popular guy

at Katmere Academy. And that he's angsty, which...no kidding. I didn't exactly need a crystal ball to guess that.

But seriously, nothing Macy told me matters, because I've decided I don't want to know any more about him.

More, I don't want to know him.

Yet when I close my eyes, I can still see him so perfectly. His clenched jaw. The thin scar that runs the length of his face. The black ice of his eyes that lets me see for a second—just a second—that he knows as much about pain as I do. Maybe more.

It's that pain I think of most as I sit here in the dark. That pain that makes me worry for him when I shouldn't give a damn one way or the other.

I wonder how he got that scar. However it happened, it had to have been awful. Terrifying. Traumatic. Devastating.

I figure that's probably why he was so cold to me. Why he tried to get me to leave and, when I wouldn't, ended up delivering that ridiculous and—I admit, mildly disconcerting—warning.

Macy said he was angsty...does that mean he treats everyone the way he treated me? And if so, why? Because he's just a jerk? Or because he's in so much pain that the only way he can handle it is to make everyone afraid of him so that he can keep them at a distance? Or do people see his scar and his scowl and decide to keep their distance all on their own?

It's an awful thought but one I can totally relate to. Not the people being afraid of me part but definitely the people keeping their distance part. Except for Heather, most of my old friends drifted away after my parents died. Heather's mom told me it was because my parents' deaths reminded them of their own mortality, reminded them that their parents could die at any time. And so could they.

Logically, I knew she was right, that they were just trying to protect themselves the only way they knew how. But that didn't

make the distance any less painful. And it definitely didn't make the loneliness any easier to bear.

Reaching for my phone, I shoot off a couple of quick texts to Heather—which I should have done as soon as I got here last night—telling her that I'm safe and explaining about the altitude sickness.

Then I lay back down, try to will myself to go back to sleep. But I'm wide-awake now, thoughts of Alaska and school and Jaxon blurring together in my head until all I want is for them to just stop.

But they don't stop, and suddenly my heart is pounding, my skin prickling with awareness. I press a hand to my chest, take a couple of deep breaths, try to figure out what has me so alarmed that I can barely breathe.

And suddenly it's right there. All the thoughts I'd shoved aside for the past forty-eight hours, just to get through leaving. Just to get here. My parents, leaving San Diego and my friends, that ridiculous airplane ride into Healy. Macy's expectations for our friendship, the way Jaxon looked at me and then *didn't* look at me, the things he said to me. The ridiculous amount of clothes I have to wear here to keep warm. The fact that I'm essentially trapped in this castle by the cold...

It all kind of melds together into one great big carousel of fear and regret, whirling through my brain. No thoughts are clear, no images stand out from any of the others—only an overwhelming feeling of impending doom.

The last time I freaked out like this, Heather's mom told me that experiencing too powerful emotions is completely normal after a huge loss. The crushing weight on my chest, the swirling thoughts, the shaking hands, the feeling that the world is going to come crashing in on me—all completely normal. She's a therapist, so she should know, but it doesn't feel normal right now.

It feels terrifying.

I know I should stay where I am—this castle is gigantic, and I have no idea where anything is—but I'm smart enough to know if I stay here staring at the ceiling, I'm going to end up having a full-blown panic attack. So instead, I take a deep breath and heave myself out of bed. I slip my feet into my shoes and grab my hoodie on my way out the door.

Back home, I'd go for a run when I couldn't sleep, even if it was three in the morning. But here, that's out of the question. Not just because it's as cold as death outside but because God only knows what wild animal is waiting for me in the middle of the night. I haven't been lying in bed listening to the roars and howls for the last half an hour for nothing.

But it's a big castle with long hallways. I may not be able to run through them, but I can at least go exploring for a while. See what I find.

I carefully close the door behind me—the last thing I want to do is wake Macy up when she's been so nice to me—then head down the hallway toward the stairs.

It's creepier than I expect it to be. I would have thought the hallways would be lit up in the middle of the night, safety protocols and all that, but instead they're dim. Like *just enough* light to see imaginary shadows sweeping along the corridors dim.

For a second, I think about going back into my room and forgetting about the whole walk/explore-the-castle thing. But just the thought has the merry-go-round starting in my brain again, and that's the last thing I can handle right now.

I pull out my phone and angle its flashlight down the hall. Suddenly the shadows disappear, and it looks like any other hallway. If you discount the rough stone walls and old-fashioned tapestries, I mean.

I have no idea where I'm going, only that I want to get off the

dorm floor. I can barely stand the thought of dealing with *Macy* right now—dealing with anyone else seems blatantly impossible.

I make it to the long, circular staircase without a problem and take the steps two at a time, all the way down to the ground floor. After my shower last night, Macy mentioned that's where the cafeteria is, along with a number of the classrooms. There are other classrooms in buildings around the grounds, but most of the core classes are taught here, inside the castle, which I am all for. The less I have to be out in that weather, the better.

Down here, the hallways are lined with more tapestries, worn and faded with age. My favorite stretches for yards and is vividly colorful. Purples and pinks, greens and yellows, all woven together with no apparent rhyme or reason—except as I step back and shine my flashlight on a wider swath of it, I realize there *is* a pattern. This is an artistic rendering of the aurora borealis—the northern lights.

I've always wanted to see them, and somehow, in all the pain and worry about moving to Alaska, I totally forgot that I'll pretty much have a front-row seat out here.

It's that thought that galvanizes me, that has me walking back toward the entryway and the giant set of double doors that lead to the front courtyard. I'm not foolish enough to go traipsing around in the snow in my hoodie and pajama bottoms, but maybe I can stick my head out, see if I can find any lights in the sky.

It's probably a bad idea—I should just head back up to bed and save the aurora borealis for another night—but now that it's in my brain, I can't shake it. My dad used to tell me stories about the northern lights, and they've always been a bucket list item for me. Now that I'm this close, I can't *not* take a look.

I use my flashlight to negotiate my way back down the hall. Once there, I hold it up so I can unlock the doors, but before I

can do more than locate the first one, both doors fly open. And in walk two guys wearing nothing but old-school concert T-shirts, jeans, and lace-up boots. No jackets, no sweaters, no hoodies, even. Just ripped jeans, Mötley Crüe, and Timberlands. It's the most ridiculous thing I've ever seen, and for a second, I can't help wondering if this castle—like Hogwarts—comes equipped with its very own ghosts. Ones who died at an eighties rock concert.

"Well, well, well. Looks like we made it back just in time," says the taller of the two guys. He's got warm copper skin, dark hair tied back in a ponytail, and a black nose ring right through his septum. "What are you doing out of bed, Grace?"

Something in his voice has nervous goose bumps prickling along my skin. "How do you know my name?"

He laughs. "You're the new girl, aren't you? Everybody knows *your* name. *Grace*." He takes a step closer, and I would swear he was sniffing me, which is completely bizarre. And also not ghostlike behavior at all. "Now, how about you answer my question? What are you doing out of bed?"

I don't tell him about the northern lights—especially since I get a glimpse of the sky before he closes the door and it's just the regular black sprinkled with stars you can see almost anywhere in the world. Just one more disappointment in a long string of them lately.

"I was thirsty," I lie badly, wrapping my arms around my waist in an effort to combat the cold gust of wind that came in with them and still lingers in the air around us. "Just wanted to get some water."

"And did you find any?" says the second guy. He's shorter than the first and stockier, too. His blond hair is shaved close against his scalp.

It seems like an innocuous enough question, except he's walking toward me as he asks it, getting into my personal space

until I have to decide whether to stand my ground or back up.

I decide to back up, mostly because I don't like the way he's looking at me. And because each step I take gets me closer to the stairs and—hopefully—my room.

"I did, thanks," I lie again, trying to sound unconcerned. "I'm just going to head back to bed now."

"Before we even have a chance to get to know you? That doesn't seem very polite, does it, Marc?" the short-haired one asks.

"It doesn't, no," Marc answers, and now he's really close, too. "Especially since Foster's been up our asses about you for weeks now."

"What does that mean?" I demand, forgetting to be afraid for a second.

"It means we've had three different meetings about you, all warning us to be on our best behavior. It's annoying as hell. Right, Quinn?"

"Absolutely. If he's that worried about you being here, I don't know why he didn't just leave you wherever you came from." Quinn reaches out, yanks one of my curls—hard. I want to pull away, want to shove him back and yell at him to leave me alone.

But there's trouble here. I can feel it, just like I can feel the barely leashed violence rolling off these guys in waves. It's like they're desperate to hurt someone, desperate to rip someone apart. I don't want that someone to be me.

"What do you think, Grace?" Marc sneers. "You think you can handle Alaska? Because I'm pretty sure it's going to naturally unselect you pretty damn quick."

"I'm just...trying to get by until graduation. I don't want any trouble." I can barely force the words out of my tight throat.

"Trouble?" Quinn laughs, but the sound is completely devoid of humor. "Do we look like trouble to you?"

They look like the very definition of trouble.

Like, if I looked trouble up in the dictionary, their pictures would be right there, front and center, along with a giant warning stamp. I don't say that, though. I don't say anything, actually, as my brain races to figure a way out of this terrifying situation. Part of me thinks I must be dreaming, because this feels like a scene out of every teen movie ever, where the school bullies decide to gang up on the new kid just to show her who's boss.

But this is real life, not the movies, and I have no delusions that I'm the boss out here or anywhere. I want to tell them that, but right now answering feels like acquiescence, and that's the last thing you're supposed to do when dealing with a bully. The more you give them, the more they try to take.

"So tell me, Grace. Have you had a chance to see the snow yet?" Marc asks, and suddenly he's way too close for comfort. "I bet you've never even seen snow before."

"I saw plenty of snow on the way up here."

"On the back of a snowmobile? That doesn't count, does it, Ouinn?"

"No." Quinn shakes his head with a snarl that shows an awful lot of teeth. "You definitely need to get closer. Show us what you can do."

"What I can do?" I have no idea what they're talking about.

"I mean, it's obvious you've got *something* going on." This time, when he breathes in, I'm sure Marc is smelling me. "I just can't quite figure out what it is, yet."

"Right?" Quinn agrees. "Me neither, but there's definitely something there. So let's see what you've got, *Grace*."

He shifts, braces himself, and that's when it hits me. What they're planning on doing. And just how much danger I'm really in.

7

Something Really Freaking Wicked This Way Comes

whirl around, adrenaline pumping, and make a break for the stairs. But Marc reaches out and grabs me before I make it more than a few feet. He yanks me hard against him—my back to his front—and wraps his arms around me as I start to struggle in earnest.

"Let me go!" I shout, bringing my heel back to kick him in the knees. But I don't have much leverage, and he doesn't so much as wince.

I think about stomping on his feet, but my Converse aren't going to do much damage to his boots, let alone his feet inside them. "Let me go or I'll scream!" I tell him, trying—and failing—not to sound scared.

"Go ahead," he tells me as he wrestles me toward the front door Quinn is conveniently holding open for him. "No one will care."

I throw my head back, slam it against his chin, and he curses, jerks one of his arms up to try to hold my head in place. Which infuriates me as much as it terrifies me. Bending down, I bite his arm as hard as I can.

He yelps and jerks, and his forearm slams against my mouth.

It hurts, has the metallic taste of blood pooling in my mouth. Which only pisses me off more.

"Stop!" I shout, bucking and kicking against him as hard as I can. I can't let them get me out the door; I can't. I'm dressed in nothing but a hoodie and a pair of fleece pants, and it's no more than ten degrees out there. With my thin California blood, I won't last more than fifteen minutes without getting frostbite or hypothermia—if I'm lucky.

But he still doesn't let go, his arms like bands of steel around me.

"Get your hands off me!" I yell, this time not caring who I wake up. In fact, hoping that I wake up someone. Anyone. Everyone. At the same time, I slam my head back with as much force as I can, aiming to break his nose.

I must hit something, because he lets me go with a curse. I hit the ground, hard, my legs buckling so that I end up on my knees just in time to see Marc go flying across the entryway, eyes wide as he slams into the farthest wall.

I don't have time to think about how that happened, though, because it takes only a second for him to recover, and then he's charging back across the foyer, straight at me. I turn to flee, fists up in an attempt to ward off Quinn if he tries to stop me, but suddenly he's flying across the foyer, too. He crashes into a bookshelf instead of a wall, and a vase falls off the top shelf and shatters against his head.

I turn around, looking for a way out, but Marc moves fast—really fast—and suddenly he's standing there, between the staircase and me. I twist to the right, trying to decide my best bet to get away, and that's when I run straight into a solid wall of muscle.

Shit. There are three of them now? Panic races through me, and I reach out, try to shove whoever it is backward. But like

Marc, this guy doesn't move. At least not until he wraps his hand around my wrist and tugs me forward hard enough to lift me straight off the ground.

It's as he's pulling me toward him that I get my first good look at his face and realize that it's Jaxon.

I don't know whether I should be relieved or even more afraid.

At least not until he yanks me behind him, putting himself between the others and me as he faces them down.

Mark and Quinn skid to a halt, the uneasiness on their faces turning to fear.

"Is there a problem here?" Jaxon asks. His voice is lower than before and more gravelly. It's also colder than the snowdrifts right outside the front door.

"No problem," Marc says with a forced chuckle. "We were just getting to know the new girl."

"Is that what they call attempted murder these days? Getting to know someone?" He doesn't raise his voice, doesn't do anything the least bit threatening. And still all three of us wince as we wait for the other shoe to drop.

"We wouldn't have hurt her, man," Quinn pipes up for the first time. He sounds a lot whinier than he did a few minutes ago, when it was just them and me. But he's not slurring his words or anything, so I guess the vase must not have done him too much damage. "We were just going to toss her outside for a few minutes."

"Yeah," Marc adds. "It was just a joke. No big deal."

"Is that what you're calling this mess?" Jaxon inquires, and somehow his voice has turned even colder. "You know the rules."

I'm not sure what rules he's talking about—or why he sounds like he's personally in charge of enforcing them—but his words have Quinn and Marc cowering that much more. Not to mention

looking a little sick to their stomachs.

"We're sorry, Jaxon. We just came in off a run, and things got a little out of hand."

"I'm not the one you should be apologizing to." He half turns, holds out a hand to me.

I shouldn't take it. Every ounce of self-defense training I've ever had says I should run. That I should take the reprieve he—Jaxon—is offering and make a mad dash for my room.

But there's a look of such intense rage simmering beneath his obsidian gaze, and I instinctively know he's turned to offer me his hand in an effort to keep the guys from seeing it. I don't know why; I just know he doesn't want them to realize how upset he is. Or maybe it's that he doesn't want them figuring out how upset he is on my behalf.

Either way, he saved me tonight, and I owe him. I hold his gaze, telling him with a look that I'll keep his secret.

And then I do what he is silently asking and step forward. I don't take his hand—that's a little too much after what he said and did earlier—but I move forward, knowing that Jaxon won't let Marc or Quinn do anything else to me.

I must get too close for his liking, however, because he shifts himself partially in front of me again, even as he shoots Quinn and Marc a cold look that warns them to behave. The warning might be unnecessary, though, because they're both looking pretty shamefaced already.

"We're sorry, Grace." Marc speaks first. "That was totally uncool of us. We didn't mean to scare you."

I don't say anything, because I'm sure as hell not going to tell them what they did to me was okay. And I'm not brave enough to tell them to go to hell, even with Jaxon acting as my shield. So I do the only thing I can do. I stare stonily at them and will their farce of an apology to be over so I can finally go back to my room.

"Yeah, you know." Quinn waves a hand at the ceiling. "The moon is doing its thing, so..."

That's the best they've got? The moon is doing its thing? I have no idea what that means, and honestly, I don't care. I'm so over this place and everyone in it. Except Macy and Uncle Finn and—maybe, just maybe—Jaxon.

"I'm going to bed." I turn to leave, but Jaxon's hand is back on my wrist.

"Wait." It's the first word he's spoken to me since the whole debacle from earlier, and it halts me in my tracks more surely than his hand around my wrist.

"Why?" I ask.

He doesn't answer. Instead, he turns back to Marc and Quinn and says, "This isn't over."

They nod, but they don't say anything else. His words must be a dismissal as well as a threat, though, because they take off down the hall, running faster than I've ever seen anyone move.

We both watch them go, and then Jaxon turns to me. For long seconds, he doesn't say anything, just looks me over from head to toe, his dark eyes cataloging every inch of me. Not going to lie. It makes me a little uncomfortable. Not in the same way that Quinn and Marc made me uncomfortable, like they were looking for a weakness to exploit. It's more a wow, did it suddenly get hot in here and why oh why am I wearing my oldest, most raggedy pair of pajama bottoms kind of uncomfortable.

Too bad I have no idea how I feel about feeling like that.

"Are you okay?" he asks quietly, his fingers finally releasing their hold on my wrist.

"I'm fine," I answer, even though I'm not sure it's true. What kind of place is this where people try to shove you outside to die as a *prank*?

"You don't look fine."

That stings a little, even though I know he's not wrong. "Yeah, well, it's been a crappy couple of days."

"I bet." His eyes are serious as he looks at me, his expression grave. "You don't have to worry about Marc and Quinn. They won't bother you again." The *I'll make sure of it* part of that statement goes unspoken, but I hear it all the same.

"Thank you," I blurt out. "For helping me, I mean. I appreciate it."

His brows go up and, if possible, his eyes go even darker in the dim light. "Is that what you think I did?"

"Isn't it?"

He shakes his head, gives a little laugh that has my heart stuttering in my chest. "You have no idea, do you?"

"No idea of what?"

"That I just made you a pawn in a game you can't begin to understand."

"You think this is a game?" I ask, incredulous.

"I know exactly what this is. Do you?"

I wait for him to say something else, to explain his cryptic comments, but he doesn't. Instead, he just stares at me until I can't help but squirm a little. I've never had anyone look at me the way he is right now, like he can't decide if he made a mistake rescuing me from imminent death.

Or maybe it's just that he can't decide what to say next. In which case, join the freaking club.

In the end, though, all that brooding silence is for nothing, because he simply says, "You're bleeding."

"I am?" My hand goes to my cheek, which aches from where Marc's shoulder banged into it when I was trying to get away from him.

"Not there." He lifts his hand to my mouth and gently—so gently I can barely feel him—brushes his thumb across my lower

lip. "Here." He holds his thumb up, and in the dim light, I can just see the smear of blood glistening on his skin.

"Oh, gross!" I reach to wipe away the blood. "Let me-"

He laughs, cutting me off. Then brings his thumb to his lips and—holding my gaze with his own—sticks his thumb in his mouth and slowly sucks off the blood.

It's the sexiest thing I've ever seen, and I don't even know why. I mean, shouldn't this be totally creeping me out?

Maybe it's the way his eyes heat up the second he tastes my blood.

Maybe it's the little noise he makes as he swallows.

Or maybe it's the fact that that swipe of his thumb across my lips, followed by that lift of it to his own lips feels more intimate than any kiss I've ever shared with another boy.

"You should go." The words sound like they're being torn out of him.

"Now?"

"Yeah, now." His expression feels intentionally vacant. Like he's trying too hard not to share with me what he's really thinking. Or feeling. "And I strongly suggest that after midnight, you stay in your room where you belong."

"Stay in my—" I bristle at what he's implying. "Are you saying I'm responsible for what happened tonight?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course I'm not. They should both have better control."

It's a weird way of saying they shouldn't go around trying to murder people, and I start to ask him about it. But he continues before I can figure out how to phrase it. "But I warned you before that you need to be careful here. This isn't like your old high school."

"How do you know what my old high school was like?"

"I don't," he says with a smirk. "But I can guarantee it's

nothing like Katmere Academy."

Jaxon's right—of course he's right—but I'm not about to back down now. "You don't know that."

He leans forward then, as if he can't help himself, until his face, and his lips, are barely an inch from mine. And just like earlier, I know it should make me uncomfortable. But it doesn't. It just makes me burn. And this time, when my knees shake, it has nothing to do with fear.

My lips part, my breath hitches in my chest, my heart beats faster. He feels it—I can see it in his blown-out pupils, in the way he goes wary and watchful. Can hear it in the sudden harshness of his own breath, sense it in the slight tremble of his body against my own. For a second, just a second, I think he's going to kiss me. But then he leans in farther, past my mouth, until his lips are all but pressed up against my ear. And I get the strange sense that he's smelling me just like Marc and Quinn had, although it has an entirely different effect on me.

"You have no idea what I know," he says softly.

The warmth of his breath has me gasping, melting, my whole body sagging against his of its own volition.

He lets it happen for one second, two, his hands on my waist, his shoulders curving down and into me. And then, just as suddenly, he's gone, stepping back so fast, I nearly fall without the support of his body.

"You need to go," he repeats, voice even lower, rougher than before.

"Now?" I demand, incredulous.

"Right now." He nods to the staircase, and somehow I find myself moving toward it, though I never make a conscious decision to do so. "Go straight to your room and lock the door."

"I thought you said I don't have to worry about Marc or Quinn anymore?" I ask over my shoulder.

te 1:22-cv-02435-LLS-SN Document 276-31 Filed 11/22/23 Page 76 of "You don't." "Well then, why do I need to-?" I break off when I realize

that I'm talking to myself. Because again, Jaxon is gone. And I'm left wondering when I'll see him again. And why it matters so much that I do.

ot going to lie. I'm a little shell-shocked when I finally make it back to my room. It's nearly five a.m., and the last thing I want to do is crawl back into bed and stare at the ceiling until Macy wakes up. But it's not like I feel safe wandering the school anymore, either, considering I could be dead by now if Jaxon hadn't shown up when he did.

And since the last thing I can do—and the last thing I want to do—is count on him to save me if I end up in another bizarre situation like that, I think my best bet is to hang in my room until Macy wakes up and I can get her opinion on what just happened. Although, if her opinion is anything other than OMG, WTF?!?! I'm taking my unpacked suitcases and heading back to San Diego. Freeloading off Heather's family for the next eight months is better than dying. Or at least that's my story and I'm sticking to it.

Especially since I don't get altitude sickness in San Diego.

The nausea hits me as I'm tiptoeing across the room, and I barely make it back to my bed with a soft groan.

Macy must have heard me because she tells me, "I promise the altitude sickness won't last forever." "It's not just the altitude sickness. It's everything."

"I bet," is all she says, and silence stretches between us. I'm pretty sure it's because she's giving me the space to sort through my thoughts and decide if I want to share any.

I stare at the gray stone ceiling above my bed pressing down on me, then take a deep breath. "It's just... Alaska's like a foreign planet, you know? Like everything about this place is so different than home that it's hard to get used to it." Normally I don't dump my stuff on people I don't know really well—it's easier to just keep everything inside—but Macy is the closest friend I have here. And there's a part of me that feels like I'll explode if I don't talk to someone.

"I totally get that. I've lived here my whole life, and some days it feels bizarre to me, too. But you've only been in the state about twelve hours, and you've been feeling gross for most of those. Why don't you give it a few days, wait till the altitude sickness wears off and you've gone to a couple classes? Maybe things won't seem as strange once you get into a routine."

"I know you're right. And I wasn't even feeling that terrible about things when I woke up, until—" I break off, trying to think of the best way to tell her about what just happened.

"Until what?" She throws back her covers and climbs out of bed.

"I know it's a pretty big school, but do you know two guys named Marc and Quinn?" I ask.

"That depends. Does one of them have a septum piercing?"

"Yes. It's a big black ring." I hold my fingers to my nose to demonstrate.

"Then yeah, I know them. They're juniors like me. And good guys, really funny. In fact, there was this one time—" I must not have a poker face, because she stops abruptly. Narrows her eyes. "Then again, I'm beginning to think the question I should be

asking is how do you know them?"

"Maybe they were just fooling around, but...I'm pretty sure they tried to kill me tonight. Or at least scare me to death."

"They tried to what?" she squawks, nearly dropping the bottle of water she had gotten out of the fridge for me. "Tell me what happened right now. And don't leave anything out."

She seems adamant, so I faithfully recite the events until I get to the point where Jaxon saved me. I'm not sure how I feel about that—or how I feel about him—and I'm not quite ready to talk about it yet. And I'm certainly not ready to listen to Macy talk about it. Plus, I'd sort of silently agreed to keep something about the interaction a secret, although admittedly now, back in my room, I wonder if I'd imagined that silent exchange or not.

"So what happened?" she asks when I don't say anything else. "How did you get away from them?"

"Someone heard the fight and came to investigate. Once the boys realized there was a witness, they chilled out pretty quickly."

"I bet they did, the jerks. The last thing they'd want is to be reported to my dad. But they should have thought of that before they put their hands on you. I swear, I'm going to murder them myself."

She looks, and sounds, mad enough to do just that even before she continues. "What were they thinking? They don't even know you, so why do this?" She gets up, starts pacing. "You totally could have gotten hypothermia if they'd left you outside for too long, let alone what could have happened if they'd kept you out there more than ten minutes. You seriously could have died. Which makes no sense. They're always a little wild, super high energy. But I've never seen them be malicious before."

"The whole thing doesn't make sense. I'm beginning to think they were high or something, because there's no other explanation as to why they would have been outside in only jeans and T-shirts. I mean, how did they avoid getting hypothermia?"

"I don't know," Macy says. But she looks uncomfortable, like maybe she knows for a fact that they do drugs. Or like she thinks I'm delusional for even suggesting that they were outside without any protective clothing on. But I know what I saw. Those two guys were definitely not wearing any kind of cold-weather gear.

"Maybe they were only outside for a minute or two," she suggests eventually, handing me two Advil. "Either way, whatever's going on with them, I'm sure my father will figure it out."

There's a part of me that wants to ask her not to tell Uncle Finn, because it's hard enough being the new girl without also being a snitch. But every time I think about what might have happened—what would have happened if Jaxon hadn't come along—I know Uncle Finn has to be told. Otherwise, what's to stop them from doing it again to somebody else?

"In the meantime, you probably need to get some more sleep. Unless you're hungry?"

Since just the thought of food has my stomach spinning in protest, I tell her, "I think I'm going to pass on that. But I'm not sure I can sleep, either. Maybe I should unpack my suitcases, get stuff ready for tomorrow."

"Don't worry about your suitcases. I already did them."

"You did? When?"

"After you fell asleep last night. I figured if you didn't like where I put things, you could change it. But at least this way, all your stuff is within easy reach."

"You didn't have to do that, Macy."

"I know I didn't have to. But you're not feeling great, so I figured a little help couldn't hurt. Besides, we have a party to go to this evening and you need to be able to find your makeup and hair stuff."

I'm not sure what amuses me more, the way Macy just casually drops in the fact that she expects me to attend a party with her today or the fact that she actually expects me to wear makeup to it, when mascara and a couple of tubes of lip gloss are pretty much all I own.

Considering she had a full face of makeup on yesterday when she was riding a snowmobile through the Alaskan wilderness, I can only imagine what her party look will be.

"So what kind of party is this exactly?" I ask as I curl up under the hot-pink comforter that is rapidly growing on me—maybe because it's the softest, most comfortable one I've ever owned.

"It's a welcome to Katmere Academy party—for you."

"What?" I sit up so fast that my head starts to throb all over again. "A welcome party? For me? Are you serious?"

"Well, to be fair, the school hosts a kind of high tea one afternoon a month to promote student unity. We just decided to make today's tea a little more festive in your honor."

"Oh, yes. Because the students have all been so welcoming so far." I bury my face in my pillow and groan.

"I swear we're not all bad. Look at Flint. He's great, right?"

"He really was." I can't help smiling as I think of the way he teased me, called me New Girl.

"Most of the people you meet here are going to be like him, not like Marc and Quinn. I promise." She sighs. "But I can cancel if you want. Tell everybody that your altitude sickness is too bad. Which, at the rate you're going, might not even be a lie."

She's trying so hard not to sound disappointed, but I can hear it, even with a pillow over my face.

"No, don't cancel," I tell her. "As long as I'm not puking, I'll go."

I've got to face these prep school kids en masse sooner or later. Might as well get it over with today when they're all under adult supervision and presumably on their best behavior. So much less chance of me being tossed into the snow or out a window that way... I shiver. Too soon for that joke.

"Awesome!" She plops down on the bed beside me, holds out the water bottle she'd given me earlier. "Don't forget, water is your friend right now," she says with a wink.

"I don't want to," I whine playfully.

"Yeah, well, I'd do it anyway. Altitude sickness requires lots and lots of hydration. I mean, if you don't want to get pulmonary or cerebral edema, which, you know, could kill you almost as fast as hypothermia."

"Seriously?" I roll my eyes at her, but I take the bottle of water and drink half of it in one go. "Has anyone ever told you you're a lot tougher than you look?"

"My boyfriend. But I think he secretly likes it."

"Good for him." I take another long swallow of water. "Do you have Netflix?"

"Are you kidding?" She gives me a look. "I live on a mountain in the middle of Alaska. I'd die without Netflix."

"Point taken. How about *Legacies*? My best friend, Heather, and I just started watching it last week."

Macy's eyes go huge. "Legacies?"

"Yeah. It's this really cool show about a bunch of teenage vampires, witches, and werewolves all living together at a boarding school. I know it sounds a little silly, but it's fun to imagine."

"It doesn't sound silly at all," Macy says with a cough. "And count me in. I mean, who can resist a hot vampire?"

"My sentiments exactly."

We start the show back at the first episode so Macy can catch up. And as we watch the main character's foster brother become a werewolf, I can't help thinking about what Marc and Quinn e 1:22-cv-02435-LLS-SN Document 276-31 Filed 11/22/23 Page 83 of TRACY WOLFF 71 said about the moon. I mean, I know it's just that they needed

the brightness of the moon to illuminate the dark wilderness around here.

Of course I know that.

Still, after going two rounds with Jaxon-both of which

ended with him warning me off—it's hard not to wonder exactly what I've gotten myself into here.

Even Hell Has its Factions

top fidgeting!" Macy tells me several hours later, smacking at my hands as we get ready to head to the party. "You look amazing."

"Are you sure?" I open my closet door, look in the full-length mirror for at least the tenth time since I got dressed.

"I'm positive. That dress is amazing on you. The color is perfect."

I roll my eyes. "It's not the color I'm worried about."

"So what are you worried about?"

"Oh, I don't know." I tug on the neckline a little, try to pull it up an inch or three. "My boobs falling out, maybe? So not the first impression I'm going for here."

She laughs. "Oh my God. The dress is gorgeous. And you look gorgeous in it."

"The dress is gorgeous," I agree. Because it is. And it probably looks perfectly respectable on Macy's tall, willowy figure. My big boobs make things a little trickier, though. "Maybe if I don't take a deep breath for the whole night, things will be okay."

"Look, maybe you should wear the jeans you originally planned." Macy crosses to my bed and holds them up. "I don't

want you to be uncomfortable."

It's tempting, so tempting. But... "Are any of the other girls going to be in jeans?"

"Who cares what the other girls are wearing."

"I take it that's a no." I tug on the neckline one more time, then give up and shut the closet door. "Come on, let's get going before I decide to stay in and binge-watch Netflix for the rest of the evening."

Macy gives me a hug. "You look really beautiful. So let's go have fun."

I roll my eyes at her a second time, because "beautiful" is a bit more than a stretch—with my curly auburn hair, plain brown eyes, and the random groupings of freckles on my nose and cheeks, I'm pretty much the opposite of beautiful.

On a good day, I'm cute. Standing next to Macy, who *is* freaking gorgeous, I'm wallpaper. The bland, boring kind.

"Come on," she continues, grabbing my forearm and tugging me toward the door. "If we wait much longer, we're going to be more than fashionably late to your welcome party."

"We could just skip it altogether," I say even as I let her pull me out the door. "Be fashionably absent."

"Too late," she answers with a deliberately obnoxious grin. "Everyone's waiting for us."

"Oh, yay." Despite the sarcasm, I head out. The sooner we get there, the sooner I'll get the hard part over with.

But as I start to weave my way through the crystal beads outside our door, Macy says, "Here, let me hold those for you. Don't want them to shock you. Sorry I didn't think about that yesterday."

"Shock me? What do you mean?"

"They shock everybody." She tilts her head to the side, gives me a funny look. "Didn't you feel it when you went downstairs last night?" "Um, no." I reach out and close my fist around several strands of beads, trying to figure out what she's talking about.

"You really don't feel anything?" Macy asks after a second.

"I really don't." I look down at my favorite pair of rose-tattoo Chucks. "Maybe it's the shoes."

"Maybe." She looks doubtful. "Come on, let's go."

She closes the door, then brushes her hands through the beads several times, like she's *trying* to get shocked. Which, I know, makes absolutely no sense, but that's definitely what it looks like.

"So," I ask as she finally gives up on whatever she's doing. "Why would you deliberately keep a beaded curtain around that builds up static electricity and shocks everyone who comes in contact with it?"

"Not everyone," she answers with a pointed look. "And because it's pretty. Obviously."

"Obviously."

As we make our way down the hall, I can't help but notice the crown molding on the walls. Decorated with black shot through with thorny gold flowers, it's elaborate and beautiful and just a little creepy. Not as creepy as the lights that line the ceiling, however, which look a lot like trios of weeping black flowers connected by crooked, thorny stems. Gold light bulbs hang from the center of the flowers, partially obscured by their downturned petals.

The whole effect is eerie but beautiful and, while I definitely wouldn't choose to decorate my room like this, I have to admit it's stunning.

So stunning that I almost don't notice that, by the time we make it to the second floor, my stomach has calmed down. More like the pterodactyls have become butterflies, but I'm not going to complain, considering it's a definite step up. I've still got a

low-grade headache from the altitude, but for now the Advil has everything under control.

I just hope it stays that way.

I know Macy says this is supposed to be a welcome party, but I'm kind of hoping the tea just goes on as usual. My goal is to be as invisible as possible this year, and a party where I'm the main attraction kind of messes with that plan. Or, you know, totally obliterates it.

As we approach the door, I grab Macy's wrist. "You aren't going to make me stand up in front of everyone, are you? We're just going to kind of mingle and walk around, right?"

"Totally. I mean, I think Dad is planning on giving a little welcome speech, but it won't be any big deal."

Of course he is. I mean, why wouldn't he? After all, who doesn't think painting a target on the new girl's back is a good idea? FML.

"Hey, don't look so worried." Macy stops in front of an ornately carved set of double doors and throws her arms around me. "Everything is going to be okay. I swear."

"I'm willing to settle for not catastrophic," I tell her, but even as I say it, I'm not holding my breath. Not when it feels like there's a weight pressing down on me. Making me smaller. Turning me into nothing.

It's not the school's fault—I've felt like this for the last month. Still, being here in this place—in Alaska—somehow makes it all worse.

"You'll settle for amazing," she corrects as she grabs my arm and wraps hers through it. Then she's leaning forward, sending the double doors flying in both directions as she walks in like she owns the place.

And maybe she does. From the way everyone in the room turns to look at her, I can believe it. At least until I realize my worst nightmares have come true and they're all looking at me. And none of them seem impressed.

So I decide to focus on the décor instead, which is amazing. I don't know where to look first, so I look everywhere, taking in the crimson and black velvet baroque wallpaper, the three-tiered iron chandeliers with black crystals dripping from each elaborately carved arm, the fancy red chairs and black cloth-covered tables that take up the back half of the large room.

Every five feet or so, there are dark wall sconces with what look like actual lit candles in them. I step closer to check them out and find myself completely charmed by the fact that each wall sconce is carved into the shape of a different dragon. One with its wings spread wide in front of a fancy Celtic cross, another curled up around the top of a castle, a third obviously in midflight. In all the dragons, the candle flame is lined up to flicker in their wide-open mouths, and as I get even closer, I realize that yes, the flame is real.

I can't imagine how my uncle gets away with that—no fire marshal in the country would be okay with letting a school have unattended candles around students. Then again, this is the middle of nowhere, Alaska, and I also can't imagine a fire marshal actually paying Katmere an unscheduled visit.

Macy tugs at my arm, and reluctantly I let her pull me away from the dragons and farther into the room. That's when I glance up and realize the ceiling is also painted red, with more of that black molding lining the top edges of the walls.

"Are you going to spend the entire party staring at the decor?" Macy teases in a low whisper.

"Maybe." Reluctantly, I take my eyes off the ceiling and focus them on the large buffet tables that run the length of the front wall, loaded down with cheese trays, pastries, sandwiches, and drinks.

No one is at the buffet table, though, and almost no one is seated at the other tables, either. Instead, students are grouped together in various areas of the room. This self-imposed isolation might be the only thing here that feels familiar. Guess it doesn't matter if you go to a regular high school in San Diego or a highend boarding school in Alaska—cliques are everywhere.

And apparently—if you are at a high-end boarding school—those cliques are about a thousand times snobbier-looking and more unapproachable than normal.

Lucky, lucky me.

As Macy and I step farther into the room, I find myself eyeing the different...factions, for lack of a better word.

Energy—and disdain—permeate the air around the students near the window as they look me over. There are about thirty-five of them, and they're all huddled into one large group, like a team going over plays right before they take the field. The guys are all wearing jeans and the girls are in tiny little dresses, both of which show off strong, powerful bodies with some major muscle definition.

Curiosity and a healthy dose of contempt cover the faces of my new classmates at the back of the room. Dressed mostly in long, flowing dresses or button-up shirts in luxurious patterns and fabrics that fit the room perfectly, they're a lot more delicatelooking than the group near the windows, and even before Macy waves excitedly at them, I know that this is her group.

She starts moving toward them, and I follow, disguising my sudden nervousness with a smile I'm far from feeling.

On our way, we pass another large clump of students, and I swear I can feel heat radiating from them in waves. Every single person in this group is tall—even the girls are close to six feet—and the fact that they're watching me with varying degrees of scorn and suspicion makes walking past them distinctly

uncomfortable. Basketball, anyone?

At least until I see Flint in the center of the group, grinning and wiggling his eyebrows at me so wildly that I can't help but giggle. Like every other guy in his group, he's dressed in jeans and a tight T-shirt that shows off his chest and biceps. He looks good. Really good. Then again, so do most of his friends. He sticks his tongue out at me right before I turn away, and this time I full-on laugh.

"What's funny?" Macy demands, but then she sees Flint and just rolls her eyes. "You know how long I spent trying to get his attention—and being totally ignored—before I gave up? If we weren't cousins who are also destined to be best friends, I would resent you."

"Pretty sure Flint and I are destined to be friends, too," I tell her as I hustle to keep up with her ridiculously long stride. "I don't think guys cross their eyes like that at girls they're interested in."

"Yeah, well, you never know. Dra—" She breaks off on a violent cough, like she's just choked on her own saliva or something.

"You okay?" I pat her back a little.

"I'm fine." She coughs again, looks a little nervous as she tugs at one of her flowy sleeves. "Drastic."

"Drastic?" I repeat, more than a little puzzled at this point.

"In case you were wondering." She shoots me an assessing look. "Before. I was going to say drastic. Like, sometimes guys go to drastic measures to get girls they like to notice them. That's what I was going to say. *Drastic*."

"Oooookay." I don't say anything else because now I'm just confused. Not so much by what she's saying as by how emphatic she's being. Then again, she got weird around Flint yesterday, too. Maybe it's being this close to him that turns her all tongue-tied.

Macy doesn't say anything else as we finally make it to the center of the huge, ornately decorated room. Not that I blame her, because the group we're passing now is filled with the most intimidating people in the place—by far. And that's saying something, considering nearly everyone in this room is unnerving as fuck.

But these people take it to a whole new level. Dressed entirely in monochromatic shades of black or white—designer shirts, dresses, trousers, shoes, *jewelry*—they all but drip money...along with a careless kind of power that it's impossible to miss. Though they are as obvious a clique as any of the others in the room, there's a kind of formality among them that the other groups lack, a sense that they have one another's backs against anyone else in the room but that the alliance ends there.

As we walk by them, I realize there is another big difference between the other groups and them. Not one of them has so much as glanced my way.

I can't help being grateful for that fact, considering my knees wobble a little more with each step I take toward Macy's friends. I'm completely overwhelmed—not just by the number of people at the party who are looking at me but by how ridiculously tight most of the groups are. Like, seriously, there's zero crossover—no guy dressed all in black hanging with a girl in a long, flowy dress. No super-tall girl making eyes at one of the sporty-looking guys, or girls, near the window.

No, everyone here at Katmere Academy seems to be staying firmly in their own lanes. And judging by the looks on their faces, it's not fear keeping them there. It's disdain for everyone else in the room.

Fun times. Seriously. I mean, I've always known prep schools are exclusive and snobby—who doesn't? But I wasn't expecting it to this degree. How much money, status, and attitude can one

group of people have, anyway?

Guess it's a good thing I'm related to the headmaster or I'd never make the cut. Nepotism for the win...or loss, depending on how this little soiree goes.

I can't imagine why I was nervous to come to this thing...

Only pride keeps me from fleeing as we get close to her friends. Well, that and the fact that acting like prey right now seems like a particularly bad idea. I mean, if I don't want to spend the rest of my senior year dodging every mean girl in the place.

"I can't wait for you to meet my friends," Macy tells me as we finally reach the group in the back. Up close, they're even more spectacular, different gemstones gleaming in their hair and against their skin. Earrings, pendants, hair clips, plus eyebrow, lip, and nose rings, all bedecked with colorful stones.

I've never felt plainer in my life, and it takes every ounce of self-control I have not to once again tug on the neckline of my borrowed dress.

"Hey, guys! This is my cousin, Gr-"

"Grace!" a beautiful redhead with a giant amethyst pendant interrupts. "Welcome to Katmere! We've heard soooo much about you." Her voice is enthusiastic to the point of being mocking, but I'm not sure who she's making fun of—Macy or me. At least until I look into her eyes, which are viciously cold—and focused entirely on me.

Big surprise.

I'm not sure how I'm supposed to answer her—being polite is one thing. Participating while she makes fun of me is something else entirely. Thankfully, before I can decide what to do, a girl with thick, curly dark hair and perfect cupid's bow lips does it for me.

"Knock it off, Simone," she tells her before turning to me with what appears (I hope) to be a genuine smile. "Hi, Grace. I'm Lily."

Her soft brown eyes seem friendly and her black hair is worn in locks woven through with sparkling ribbons that beautifully frame her rich brown skin. "And that's Gwen."

She nods toward an East Asian girl in a beautiful purple dress who grins and says, "It really is nice to meet you."

"Um, it's nice to meet you, too." I'm trying, I really am. But my tone must sound as doubtful as the rest of me feels, because her eyes grow cloudy.

"Don't pay any attention to Simone," she says, all but hissing the redhead's name. "She's just bitter because all the guys are looking at you. She doesn't like the competition."

"Oh, I'm not—" I break off as Simone snorts.

"Yeah, that's totally why I'm bitter. I'm worried about the competition. It has nothing to do with the fact that Foster brought a—"

"Why don't we go get something to drink?" Macy interrupts her loudly.

I start to tell her I'm not thirsty—the low-grade nausea is back—but she doesn't wait for my answer before she slips her hand in mine and draws me across the room to the buffet tables.

At one end, there are two huge teapots and an arrangement of teacups along with two open coolers filled with icy water bottles and cans of soda.

I start to reach for a cup—I've been freezing since I first landed in this state. But then I notice several orange and white five-gallon sports thermoses set up on a separate table. "What are those?" I ask, because I'm curious. And because there seem to be an awful lot of drinks for the number of people in this room. I really, really hope this doesn't mean that a bunch more students are going to be showing up. We're already over my comfort level with the number who are already here.

"Oh, those are just water," Macy says breezily. "We always

keep a bunch on hand in case the temperature drops suddenly and the pipes freeze. Better safe than sorry."

It seems to me that they'd have special pipes and extra insulation for places in Alaska to make sure that doesn't happen. But what do I know? I mean, it's only November and it's already below freezing outside. And that's *normal*. It makes sense that a particularly harsh winter could really mess things up here.

Before I can ask anything else, Macy bends down, pulls a Dr Pepper out of the cooler, and holds it out to me. "I made sure Dad told them to order Dr Pepper for the party—and the cafeteria. It's still your favorite, right?"

It is my favorite. I thought I was in the mood for tea, but there's something about that maroon can that gets to me. That reminds me of home and my parents and the life I used to have. Homesickness wells up inside me, and I take the drink, desperate for something—anything—familiar.

Macy smiles at me, nods encouragingly, and I realize that she knows what I'm feeling. Gratitude helps chase away the homesickness. "Thanks. That's really cool of you."

"It's nothing." She knocks her shoulder against mine. "So, who do you want to meet next?" She nods to two guys lounging in red velvet armchairs near the back of the room. They're dressed in the richly patterned button-ups that mark them as members of Macy's group. "That's Cam and his best friend."

"Cam?" She said the name as though I should recognize it, but I don't.

"My boyfriend. He's been dying to meet you. Come on."

Pretty hard to say no to that, so I don't even try, though I know Cam and anyone else who is "dying to meet" the new girl are destined to be disappointed. I'm just not that interesting.

"Cam! This is the cousin I was telling you about!" Macy squeals before we even get next to her boyfriend.

He stands and holds out a hand. "Grace, right?"

"Yes." I shake his hand, and as I do, I can't help noticing how pasty his skin is. "It's good to meet you."

"Good to meet you, too. Macy's been talking about you coming for weeks now." He grins at me. "Hope you like snow, surfer girl."

I don't bother to tell him that I'm not much of a surfer. God knows I'm guilty of stereotyping, too—before I got here, I was half certain I'd be living in an igloo.

"I don't know if I do or not," I tell him. "Yesterday was the first time I've ever seen it."

That gets his attention—and his friend's, too. "You've *never* seen snow?" the other guy asks incredulously. "Ever?"

"Nope."

"She's from San Diego, James." Macy looks, and sounds, exasperated. "Is that really so hard to believe?"

"I guess not." He shrugs and sends me a grin that I can tell is meant to be charming but grossly misses the mark. I've always hated guys who look at girls like they're food meant to be gobbled up. "Hi, Grace."

He doesn't extend his hand, and I definitely don't extend mine. "Hi."

"So what do you think of Alaska so far?" Cam asks as he loops an arm around Macy's waist. He doesn't wait for an answer before he sits back down, pulling my cousin onto his lap as he does.

Before I can answer, he's got his face buried in Macy's neck and she's giggling, her hands threading their way through his sleek brown hair as she burrows into him.

Which is pretty much my cue to leave, as things suddenly get really awkward. Especially since James continues to stare at me like he's waiting to see if I'm going to plop myself down on *his* lap—which, for the record, I most definitely am not.

"I, uh, need another drink," I tell him, awkwardly holding up my still mostly full can of Dr Pepper.

"I can get it for you," he offers, starting forward, but I take

a big step back.

"You don't have to."

Tou don't have to.

"You okay, Grace?" Macy breaks off her giggling long enough to ask, completely serious. "Yeah, of course. I'm fine. I'm just—" Once again, I hold up

my Dr Pepper. "I'll be back in a minute."

Cam must do something super sexy to her, because Macy's laugh changes, gets lower, about the same time I lose all her attention.

I don't wait for James to offer again—or worse, insist. Instead, I take off across the room like a shot. But I barely make it to the drinks table before two very large, very warm hands land on my shoulders.

Turns Out the Devil Wears Gucci

freeze, my heart running wild as *NotJames NotJames NotJames NotJames* runs through my head like a mantra on overdrive. I mean, seriously. Don't I have enough on my plate right now? Do I really need some jerk trying to make me his afternoon snack as well?

But before I can figure out what to say, the guy leans forward and—in a low, rich voice—asks, "Want a piggyback ride?"

And just like that, the tension dissolves, leaving nothing but a cautious joy in its place. "Flint!" I whirl around to find him grinning at me, amber eyes dancing wickedly.

"Hey there, New Girl," he drawls. "Having fun?"

"Absolutely." I hold up my Dr Pepper. "Doesn't it look like I'm having a good time?"

"It looks like someone can't take a hint, so I thought I'd lend a hand." As one, we shift to watch James—who, as it turns out, did follow me to the drink table—sulkily make his way back to Cam and Macy, who are still wrapped up in each other.

"Thanks for that. I appreciate it."

"Gratitude is so last year." He says it in a fake, high-pitched voice that sounds remarkably like every mean girl everywhere.

The voice, along with the ridiculous hand gesture he uses to accompany it, has me laughing so hard, I nearly snort. And that's when I realize that half the room is still staring at me—while the other half is very deliberately *not* staring at me. Their disregard would be a relief *if* I didn't know they were doing it to make sure I understand how insignificant I really am to them.

Which, duh.

"So do you want to grab something to eat?" Flint asks, nodding behind us.

Before I can answer, both of the room's heavy wooden doors fly open. They slam against the wall with a *bang* that makes everyone in the room jump. And then turn to look.

On the plus side, that means no one is paying attention to me anymore. Because they're all looking at him. At *Jaxon*. And really, who could blame them when he walks in like he owns the place—and everybody in it.

Dressed all in Gucci black—silk V-neck sweater, wool pinstripe pants, shiny leather dress shoes—with his scarred eyebrow furrowed and his dark gaze as cold as the snow-covered ground outside, he shouldn't look sexy at all. But he does. God, he really, really does.

On the negative side, all that coldness—all that darkness—is focused directly on me. And Flint, whose arm has somehow found its way around my shoulders.

I try to glance away, but it's impossible. Try not to look Jaxon in the eyes. But he's just as captivating—just as mesmerizing—today as he was last night. And that's before he starts to move, all languid grace, all rolling shoulders and leading hips and legs that go on for freaking ever.

It's overwhelming.

He's overwhelming.

He's just a guy, I remind myself even as my mouth turns

desert dry. Just a regular guy like everyone else here. But even as I tell myself that, I know it's a lie. Jaxon is anything but regular. Anything but ordinary, even here, among the blatantly extraordinary.

Next to me, Flint chuckles a little, and I want to ask him what's so funny when I notice Jaxon heading straight toward us, with an icy blankness in his eyes that makes a shiver run straight through me. But I can't get the words out, can't get anything out of a throat that has closed up tight.

I take a strangled breath, hoping it will chill me out a little. It doesn't work, but then I never really thought it would.

Not when all I can see is how he looked last night, sucking my blood off his thumb.

Not when all I can hear is his voice—low, wicked, wild—warning me to lock my door.

Not when all I can think about is kissing that mouth, running my tongue along the perfect bow of his upper lip, dragging his lower lip between my teeth and biting down just a little bit.

I don't know where the thoughts are coming from—this isn't like me. I've never thought about a guy like this before, not even my old boyfriend from back home. Even before we went out, I never stood around imagining what it would be like to kiss him.

To wrap my arms around him.

To press my body tightly against his.

Because I can almost feel him—almost taste him. I try to make myself think of anything else. Snow. Tomorrow's classes. My uncle, who is supposed to be here but is currently MIA.

None of it works, because all I can see is him.

My skin heats up under his gaze, my cheeks burning with embarrassment at the thoughts flitting through my head. And at the way he's looking at me, like he can read every single one of them. It's impossible; I know it is. But the idea terrifies me enough that I jerk my gaze from his and lift my Dr Pepper to my mouth, trying hard to look unconcerned.

All of which leads to the carbonated drink going straight down the wrong pipe.

My abused lungs revolt as I cover my mouth and cough hard, eyes watering and humiliation burning in my belly. I pretend he isn't watching, pretend Flint isn't pounding on my back, pretend that I don't even notice the weight of all those cold stares as my new classmates watch me trying to suck air into lungs that just won't cooperate.

I need to get away from Flint's overzealous help, from Jaxon's threatening, all-encompassing gaze. At least if I find the nearest restroom, I can die in peace.

I start to move—I think I saw a bathroom marked in the hallway a couple of doors down—but I've taken only a few steps when Jaxon's suddenly right next to me. He doesn't acknowledge me, doesn't even look at me as he passes, but just like at the top of the stairs yesterday, our shoulders brush as he walks by.

My choking fit disappears as quickly as it started. Fresh air floods my lungs.

If I didn't know it was impossible, I would think he had something to do with it. Not just the choking but the stopping of it, as well.

But he didn't. Of course he didn't. The whole idea is absurd.

Knowing that doesn't keep me from turning around and watching him walk away, even though it's the worst thing I can do—for my sanity and my reputation—if the snark and giggles behind me are any indication.

He doesn't look back. In fact, he doesn't look at anyone as he walks along the edges of the buffet table, surveying its bounty. Doesn't so much as glance up as he eventually swipes one large, perfect strawberry from a bowl.

I expect him to pop it in his mouth then and there, but he doesn't.

Instead, he walks to the center of the room—and the huge red velvet wingback chair positioned under the chandelier like a throne, with several other chairs in a half circle in front of it. Once there, he slouches down into the chair, legs spread out in front of him as he says something to the five guys—all dark, all gorgeous, all stunning—sitting in the other chairs.

It's the first time I realize there's anyone in those chairs.

By now, nearly everyone in the room is watching Jaxon, trying to catch his eye. But he ignores them all, deliberately studying the strawberry he is pinching between his thumb and index finger.

Eventually he lifts his gaze and looks straight at me. Then he raises the strawberry to his lips—and bites it clean in half.

It's a warning if I've ever seen one—and a violent one at that—as a drop of red juice hangs for a second on his bottom lip.

I know I should stay, know I should face him down. But as his tongue darts out and licks up the strawberry juice in a very obvious *screw you* to Flint and me and everyone else in the room, I do the only thing I can.

I turn to Flint and blurt out, "I'm sorry. I have to go."

And then I head for the doors in as close to a run as I can manage without looking even more pathetic, desperate to get away before I shatter beneath the weight of Jaxon's obvious contempt.

Because one thing is certain—that little show was meant to underscore just how insignificant I really am to every single person in that room. I just wish I knew why... 11

In the Library, No One Can Hear You Scream

nce I get outside the room, I start to run, desperate to put as much space between Jaxon and myself as I can manage. I have no idea where I'm running, and I don't think it would matter even if I did. Not when I don't have a clue where anything is in this place.

I take a left at the end of the hallway, operating on pure instinct. On my complete desperation to be anywhere but at that party.

I have no idea what I did to make Jaxon so mad, have no idea why he blows so hot and cold with me. I've run into him four times since I got to this frozen hellhole, and each time has been a different experience. Douchey the first time, blank the second, intense the third, and furious the fourth. His moods change more quickly than my bestie's Insta feed.

I get to another dead end, and this time I take a right. Seconds later, I come upon a staircase, this one as plain and un-fantastic as the main one is grand and ornate. I race down one flight and then another and another to the second floor. Once there, I take another right and don't stop until I run out of hallway.

I'm also out of breath and a little queasy, thanks to the

altitude sickness that I just can't seem to shake. I stop a minute and let myself breathe. As I do, the embarrassment finally recedes enough that my rational mind can take over.

Suddenly, I feel like a total moron for freaking out and an even bigger one for running away from Jaxon, who performed the very scary act of biting into a strawberry while looking at me.

Deep inside, I know it's more than that. It's the look on his face, the indolence of his body language, the very obvious *fuck you* in his eyes as he stared directly at me. But still, fleeing the way I did seems absurd now.

Not absurd enough to make me go back to that ridiculously uncomfortable party, but more than absurd enough to make me embarrassed by my actions.

As I straighten and try to figure out what I'm going to do—heading back to my dorm room for more Advil and then some sleep is pretty much top of the list—I realize I'm standing in front of the school's library. And since I've never met a library I didn't like, I can't resist opening the door and walking inside.

The moment I do, I get hit with the oddest feeling. Dread pools in my stomach, and everything inside tells me to turn around, to go back the way I came. It's the strangest feeling I've ever had in my life, and for a second I think about giving in to it. But I've already done more than enough running for the day, so I ignore the pressure in my lungs and the uneasy churning in my stomach and keep walking forward until I'm standing in front of the checkout desk.

Once there, I take a few minutes to just stand and look around the library. It only takes a second for the feeling of dread to dissipate and for absolute wonder to take its place. Because whoever runs this library is my kind of people. Part of it is the sheer number of books—tens of thousands of them at least, lined up in bookcase after bookcase. But there are other things, too.

Gargoyles perched on random bookshelves, looking down as if guarding the books.

A few dozen shimmering crystals, interspersed with sparkling ribbons, hanging from the ceiling in what appears to be randomly spaced intervals.

All the room's open spaces have been turned into study alcoves, filled with beanbags and overstuffed chairs and even a few well-worn leather couches where there's room for them.

But the pièce de résistance, the thing that has me dying to meet the librarian, is the stickers plastered everywhere. On the walls, on the bookshelves, on the desks and chairs and computers. Everywhere. Big stickers, little stickers, funny stickers, encouraging stickers, brand-name stickers, emoji stickers, sarcastic stickers... The list goes on and on, and there's a part of me that wants to wander the library until I read or look at every single one.

But there are too many for one tour—too many for a dozen tours, if I'm honest—so I decide to start this one by checking out the stickers I run across when following the gargoyles.

Because after seeing the rest of the library, I don't believe for one second that the statues are randomly placed. Which means I desperately want to know what the librarian wants to show me.

The first gargoyle—a fierce-looking thing with bat wings and a furious snarl—stands guard over a shelf of horror novels. The bookshelf itself is decorated with Ghostbusters stickers, and I can't help but laugh as I trace the spines of everyone from John Webster to Mary Shelley, from Edgar Allan Poe to Joe Hill. The fact that there's a special homage to Victor Hugo only makes it better, especially the tongue-in-cheek placement of three copies of The Hunchback of Notre-Dame right in the gargoyle's line of sight.

The second gargoyle—a squat fellow resting on his haunches

on a pile of skulls—presides over a bookcase filled with textbooks on human anatomy.

The fantasy bookshelf, complete with beautifully covered books about dragons and witches, is home to the third gargoyle statue, who has really fantastical wings and big claws curling around the miniature book she's reading. Unlike the others, both of whom look ferocious, this girl looks mischievous, like she knows she's going to get in trouble for being up way past her bedtime, but she just can't put the story down.

I decide instantly that she's my favorite and pick out a book from her shelf to read tonight in case I can't sleep. Then nearly laugh out loud as I trace my finger around the edges of a sticker that reads, "I'm not a damsel in distress; I'm a dragon in a dress."

I continue wandering from statue to statue, from a small shelf on Gothic architecture to a whole bookcase devoted to ghost stories. On and on it goes, and the longer I'm in here, the more convinced I am that the head librarian here is the coolest person ever—and has fantastic taste in books.

I make it to the end of the trail and turn the corner around the last bookshelf in search of the final gargoyle, only to find him pointing straight toward a half-open door. There's a huge sign on it that reads students must have permission to access this room, and—of course—that only makes me more curious. Especially since the light is on and there's some weird kind of music playing.

I try to place it, but as I get closer, I realize it's not so much music as it is chanting in a language I don't recognize and certainly can't understand. Instantly, my curiosity turns to excitement.

When I was researching Alaska, I learned that there are twenty different languages spoken here by the state's native peoples, and I can't help but wonder if that's what I'm hearing. I hope so—I've totally been wanting a chance to listen to one of the native lan-

guages spoken. Especially since so many of them are threatened, including a couple that have less than four thousand speakers in the entire world. That these native languages are dying out is one of the saddest things I've ever heard.

Maybe if I'm lucky, I can kill two birds with one stone here. I can meet the very cool librarian responsible for this library and get a lesson from her (because the voice is definitely female) on one of the native languages. Even one of those options makes for a much better night than standing around being stared at at a party that was supposedly thrown to welcome me.

But when I step up to the door, ready to introduce myself, I find that the person doing the chanting isn't the librarian at all. She's a girl about my age, with long, silky dark hair and one of the most beautiful faces I've ever seen. Maybe *the* most beautiful.

She's holding open a book and reading from it, which explains the chanting I heard. I want to ask what language it is, since I can't see the cover, but the way her head snaps up when I step over the threshold has the words drying up in my throat.

Whoever she is, she looks fierce, cheeks flushed, and mouth open wide to let out the unique sounds of whatever language she is speaking. She stops mid-word, with what looks an awful lot like fury burning in her swirling black eyes.

12

It's All Fun and Games Until Someone Loses Their Life

fumble for an apology—or at least an excuse—but before I can come up with one, the rage in her eyes is gone. In fact, it dissipates so quickly, I can't be sure I didn't imagine it. Especially since the anger, or whatever it was, turns to welcome as she walks toward me.

"You must be Grace," she says in slightly accented English as she comes to a stop about a foot in front of me. "I've been looking forward to meeting you." She extends a hand forward and I take it, bemused, as she continues. "I'm Lia, and I have a feeling we're going to be really good friends."

It's not the strangest greeting I've ever gotten—that honor still belongs to Brant Hayward, whose version of *nice to meet you* was wiping his boogers all over my first-day-of-school dress when we were both in kindergarten—but it's a close second. Still, there's an infectiousness about her smile that has me grinning back.

"I am Grace," I agree. "It's nice to meet you."

"Oh, don't be so formal," she tells me, gently steering me out of the room before I can mention that I want to look around. Seconds later, she's got the lights off and the door closed behind us, all in the most efficient way possible.

"What language was that you were speaking? Was it native to Alaska? It was beautiful," I say as we start walking back toward the center of the library.

"Oh, no." She laughs, a light, tinkling sound that perfectly matches the rest of her. "It's actually a language I came across in my research. I've never heard it spoken out loud, so I'm not even sure I'm pronouncing it correctly."

"Well, it sounded amazing. What kind of book was it in?" Now I wish more than ever that I'd gotten a look at the cover.

"A boring one," she answers with a wave of her hand. "I swear this research project is going to kill me. Now, come on, let's go get some tea, and you can tell me all about yourself. Plenty of time to talk about classes when you're actually stuck *in* them."

I decide not to mention that starting new classes is pretty much the only thing I've been looking forward to about the move to Alaska. I mean, my public school definitely didn't offer Witch Hunts in the Atlantic World for a history credit. Besides, tea sounds wonderful, especially considering what just happened when I tried a Dr Pepper. So does the idea of making a friend at this place where everyone looks at me like I have three heads... or like I'm nothing at all.

"Are you sure you aren't busy? I didn't mean to interrupt. I just wanted to explore the library a little bit. I love the gargoyle theme. Very Gothic."

"It is, right? Ms. Royce is cool like that."

"Oh, yeah? Let me guess. Flannel shirts and a hipster vibe? That kind of thing?"

"You would think. But she's actually more a hippie skirt and flower crown kind of woman."

"Now I want to meet her even more." We're on the other side of the library from where I came in and we pass through a

sitting area with a bunch of black couches, each one dotted with purple throw pillows bearing different quotes from classic horror movies. My favorite is Norman Bates's famous line from Psycho: "We all go a little mad sometimes." Although I'm also partial to the pillow next to it: "Be afraid. Be very afraid," from The Fly.

"Ms. Royce is big on Halloween," Lia says with a laugh. "I don't think she's put everything away yet."

Oh, right. Halloween wasn't that long ago. I've been so focused on everything else that I just about forgot about it completely this year, even though Heather spent months making her costume from scratch.

I put the book I picked up earlier down on the nearest table— I'll come back for it when the librarian is here— Lia pushes the main door open and gestures for me to precede her. I wait while she turns off the lights, then locks the door. "The library is usually closed on Sunday nights, but I'm doing an independent study this semester, so Ms. Royce lets me work late sometimes."

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize-"

"No need to apologize, Grace." She shoots me a vaguely exasperated look. "How were you supposed to know? I'm just telling you why I have to lock things back up."

"Good point," I admit, a little surprised at how nice she's being.

She starts down the hallway. "So I'm assuming, since you aren't at the party Macy organized for you, that your first full day at our illustrious school hasn't been as smooth as your cousin hoped it'd be?"

She's got that right, but I'm not going to admit it when that would sound like I'm throwing Macy under the bus. Especially since Macy isn't the problem. Everything else is, but not her. "The party was good. I've just had a really long day. I needed a break for a few minutes."

"Yeah, I'm definitely not from Vancouver." I shiver a little as an unexpected wind whips through the hallway.

I glance around, looking for where it could be coming from, then get distracted as Lia raises her brows and says, "Alaska is a long way from California."

"How did you know I'm from California?" Maybe that's why everyone is staring at me—I must be wearing my not-from-here vibe like a parka.

"Foster must have mentioned it when he let us know you were coming," she answers. "And I've got to say, San Diego is pretty much the worst possible place to move here from."

"It's the worst possible place to move anywhere from," I agree. "But especially here."

"No doubt." She looks me up and down, then smirks. "So are you freezing in that dress?"

"Are you kidding? I've been freezing since I landed in Fairbanks. Doesn't matter what I wear—even before Macy talked me into putting on this thing."

"Guess we better get you that tea, then." She nods to the staircase that's just come into view. "My room's on the fourth floor, if that's okay?"

"Oh, ours is, too. Mine and Macy's, I mean."

"Awesome."

Lia keeps talking as we make our way to the stairs, pointing out different rooms she thinks I need to know—the chem lab, the study lounge, the snack shop. Part of me wants to pull out my phone and take notes—or, better yet, draw a map, since I'm hopeless with directions. Maybe if I can figure out something as simple as the layout of the castle, other things will fall into place, too. And then I can start to feel safe again—something I

haven't felt in a really long time.

We finally make it back to Lia's room—she's in what I'm assuming is the West hallway, judging by its location in relation to mine. I'm a little surprised when she stops in front of the one door on the hallway, maybe on the whole floor, that doesn't have some kind of decoration on it.

My surprise must show, because she says, "It's been a rough year. I just wasn't up to decorating when I got back here."

"That sucks. The rough-year part, I mean. Not the decorating part."

"I knew what you meant." She smiles sadly. "My boyfriend died several months ago, and everyone thinks I should be over it. But we were together a really long time. It's not that easy to just let him go. As I'm sure you know."

It's been a month since my parents died, and I still feel like I'm in shock half the time. "No, it's not."

Like I wake up every morning and for a minute, just a minute, I don't remember why I have that sinking feeling in my stomach.

I don't remember that they're gone and I'm never going to see them again.

I don't remember that I'm alone.

And then it hits me all over again, and so does the grief.

Getting on that first plane yesterday morning was the hardest thing I've ever done—besides identifying them—and I think it's because it made their deaths sink in just a little more.

Lia and I just kind of stand there in the middle of her dorm room for a second, two people who look fine on the outside but who are destroyed on the inside. We don't talk, don't say anything at all. Just stay where we are and absorb the fact that someone else hurts as much as we do.

It's a bizarre feeling. And an oddly comforting one.

Eventually, Lia moves over to her desk, where she has an

electric kettle plugged in. She pours some water into it from the pitcher she also has on her desk, then turns it on before opening a jar of what looks like potpourri and scooping it into two tea strainers.

"Can I help with anything?" I ask, even though she seems to have things under control. It's nice to see her go through the ritual of making tea from homemade leaves. It reminds me of my mom and all the hours we spent in the kitchen assembling all her different blends.

"I've got it." She nods to the second bed in the room, which she has set up as a kind of couch/daybed thing with a red comforter and a bunch of jewel-toned throw pillows. "Go ahead and sit down."

I do, wishing I was in yoga pants or joggers instead of this dress so I could sit like a normal person. Lia doesn't talk much as she makes the tea, and I don't, either. Kind of hard to know where to take the conversation now that we've covered everything from dying languages to dead loved ones.

The silence drags on, and I start to feel uncomfortable. But it doesn't take long for the teakettle to boil, thankfully, and then Lia's setting a cup of tea down in front of me. "It's my own special blend," she says, holding her cup up to her mouth and blowing softly. "I hope you like it."

"I'm sure it's awesome." I wrap my hands around my cup and nearly shudder with relief at finally being able to warm up my fingers. Even if it tastes terrible, it's worth it to have a chance at not being cold.

"These cups are beautiful," I tell her after taking a sip. "Are they Japanese?"

"Yes," Lia says with a smile. "From my favorite shop back home in Tokyo. My mom sends me a new set every semester. It helps with the homesickness." "That's awesome." I think of my own mom and the way she always bought me a new tea mug every Christmas. Looks like Lia and I really do have a lot in common.

"So how did the party go? I assume not well, considering you ended up in the library, but did you at least get to meet some people?"

"I did, yeah. They seemed nice enough."

She laughs. "You're a really bad liar."

"Yeah, well, it seemed polite to try." I take a sip of the tea, which has a really powerful floral taste that I'm not sure I care for. But it's hot, and that's enough to have me taking another sip. "I've been told that before, though. The bad-liar part, I mean."

"You should probably work on that. At Katmere, knowing how to lie well is practically Survival 101."

It's my turn to laugh. "I guess I'm in serious trouble, then."

"I guess you are." There's no humor in her answer this time, and I realize suddenly that there was none in her original statement, either.

"Wait," I say, strangely discomfited by that fact. "What do you guys have to lie about that's so important?"

That's when Lia looks me straight in the eye and answers, "Everything."

13

Just Bite Me

have no idea how to respond to that. I mean, what am I supposed to say? What am I supposed to think?

"Don't look so scandalized," she tells me after a few seconds of awkward silence. "I'm just teasing, Grace."

"Oh, right." I laugh along with her, because what else can I do? Still, it doesn't feel right. Maybe because of how serious she looked when she told me that she lies about everything. Or maybe because I can't help wondering if that was the truth and these are just lies... Either way, there's not much else for me to do but shrug and say, "I figured you were just messing with me."

"I totally was. You should have seen your face."

"I bet," I answer with a laugh.

She doesn't say anything for a few seconds and neither do I, until the silence starts to feel awkward. In self- defense, I finally blurt out, "What language were you reading earlier? It sounded so cool."

Lia looks at me for a second, like she's debating if she wants to answer or not. Finally, she answers, "Akkadian. It's the language that evolved from ancient Sumerian."

"Really? So it's three thousand years old?"

She looks surprised. "Something like that, yeah."

"That's incredible. I've always been so impressed with linguists and anthropologists who do that, you know? Like it's one thing to figure out what the different letters mean and the words they make." I shake my head in awe. "But to figure out what they sound like? It kind of blows my mind."

"Right?" Her eyes glow with excitement. "The foundation of language is so—"

My phone vibrates with several text messages in a row, cutting her off. I pull it out, figuring Macy finally got tired of waiting for me to come back. Sure enough, my home screen is a series of texts from my cousin, each one a little more frantic than the one before it. Looks like she's been texting me for a while but I had my ringer off.

Macy: Hey, where'd you go?

Macy: I keep waiting for you to come back

Macy: Hey, where are you????
Macy: I'm coming to find you
Macy: Are you okay????

Macy: Answer me!!!!!
Macy: What's going on?
Macy: Are. You. OK?????

I text her back a quick, *I'm good*, and my phone immediately buzzes again. A glance at my cousin's all-caps *WHERE ARE YOU?* and I know I'd better find her before she loses it completely.

"Sorry, Lia, but I've got to go. Macy's freaking out."

"Why? Because you left the party? She'll get over it."

"Yeah, but I think she's actually worried." I don't tell her about what happened with those guys last night, don't mention that that's probably why Macy is so upset that she can't find me. Instead, I focus on my phone and text back *Lia's room* before standing up. "Thanks for the tea."

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looks half amused, half disappointed as she continues. "You don't want your cousin to think she can boss you around."

I carry my cup over to the bathroom sink. "She's not boss-

I carry my cup over to the bathroom sink. "She's not bossing me around. I think she's afraid I'm upset or something." It seems easier to give that explanation than to go into everything that happened with Marc and Quinn. "Besides, if I know her, she's on her way to your room right now."

"You're probably right. Macy does tend to be the hysterical type."

"I didn't say that—" A knock on the door cuts me off.

Lia just grins at me in an *I told you so* kind of way. "Don't worry about washing the cup," she says, taking it from my hands. "Just go show Macy that you're not crying your eyes out. And that I didn't murder you."

"She wouldn't think that. She's just worried about me." Still, I make a beeline for the door, then throw it open to reveal my cousin—as predicted—on the other side. "I'm right here," I tell her with a smile.

"Oh, thank God!" She throws her arms around me. "I thought something had happened to you."

"What could possibly happen to me when nearly everyone else is at the party? I just went for a walk," I try to joke.

"I don't know." She looks suddenly uncertain. "Lots of things..."

"I think Macy was worried you might have gone outside," Lia interjects. "If you had wandered out in that dress, you'd be close to dead by now."

"Yes, exactly!" Macy looks like she's seized on the excuse. "I didn't want you to freeze to death before your first full day in Alaska is over." It's a strange answer, especially considering she knows what almost happened to me last night and that I was

terrified of being thrown outside for just that reason. But now isn't exactly the time to get into all that, so I turn to Lia instead. And say, "Thanks for everything."

"No worries." She grins at me. "Stop by again sometime. We'll do mani-pedis or facials or something."

"Sounds good. And I'd love to hear more about your research."

"Mani-pedis?" Macy repeats, sounding surprised. "Research?"

Lia rolls her eyes. "Obviously, you're invited, too." And then she closes the door in our faces.

Which...let's be honest, seems weird, considering how friendly she's been all night. Then again, the second Macy showed up, everything about Lia got a lot sharper. Maybe her abrupt good night has more to do with my cousin than it does with me.

And then Macy whispers, "I can't believe you got invited to do mani-pedis with Lia Tanaka. *After* being invited to her room."

She doesn't sound jealous, just confused. Like it's the strangest thing in the world for Lia and me to have something in common. "It wasn't hard. She seems really nice."

"Nice' isn't the adjective I would normally use to describe her," Macy answers as we start down the hall. "She's the most popular girl in school and normally takes great pains to remind people of that. Although lately, she's been really reclusive."

"Yeah, well, after losing her boyfriend, I figure she's entitled." Macy's eyes go huge. "She *told* you about that?"

"Yeah." A sickening thought occurs to me. "Is it a secret?"

"No. It's just... I've heard she doesn't talk about Hudson." Her voice is off when she says it, and suddenly she's looking anywhere but at me. I'm pretty sure it's because she's uncomfortable and not because the thousand-year-old tapestry she's currently looking at and has probably seen a million times is more interesting than

our conversation. I just wish I knew why.

"That's not that surprising, is it?" I answer. "And she didn't really talk about him to me. Just told me that he died."

"Yeah. Almost a year ago. It kind of rattled the school." She's still not looking at me, which is growing weirder by the second.

"Was he a student here?"

"He was, but he graduated the year before he died. Still, it really freaked a lot of us out."

"I bet." I want to ask what happened, but she's so uncomfortable that it seems rude, so I let it go.

We walk in silence for a couple of minutes, giving the subject time to dissipate. Once it does, Macy bounces back to her normal self and asks, "Are you hungry? You didn't eat anything at the party."

I start to say yes—I haven't eaten since the bowl of Frosted Flakes Macy poured me this morning from her stash—but the altitude sickness must be back, because the mention of food has my stomach rumbling, and not in a good way. "You know, I think I'm just going to go to bed. I'm not feeling so great."

For the first time, Macy looks worried. "If you aren't feeling better in the morning, I think we'd better stop by the nurse. You've been here more than twenty-four hours now. You should be starting to get used to the altitude."

"When I googled it, it said twenty-four to forty-eight hours. If I'm not better after tomorrow's classes, I'll go. Okay?"

"If you're not better after tomorrow's classes, I'm pretty sure my dad will drag you there himself. He's been frantic about you since you asked him to leave you in San Diego to finish up your semester."

Another awkward silence starts to descend, and honestly, I just can't take it right now. So it's my turn to change the subject when I say, "I can't believe how tired I am. What time is it anyway?"

Macy laughs. "It's eight o'clock, party animal."

"I'll party next week. After I finally get some sleep...and after this gross altitude sickness goes away." I put a hand to my stomach as the nausea from earlier returns with a vengeance.

"I'm such a jerk." Macy rolls her eyes at herself. "Planning a party on your first couple of days here was a bad move on my part. I'm so sorry."

"You're not a jerk. You were just trying to help me meet people."

"I was trying to show off my fabulous older cousin—"

"I'm older by, like, a year."

"Older is older, isn't it?" She grins at me. "Anyway, I was trying to show you off and help you get acclimated. I didn't think about the fact that you might need a day or two to just breathe."

We make it to our room, and Macy unlocks the door with a flourish. Just in time, too, because my stomach revolts about two seconds after I walk in the door. I barely make it to the bathroom before I throw up a noxious combination of tea and Dr Pepper.

Looks like Alaska really is trying to kill me after all.

Knock, Knock, Knocking on Death's Door

spend the next fifteen minutes trying to throw up the inside of my stomach and hoping that if this godforsaken place *is* trying to kill me, it just gets it over with already.

When the nausea finally stops about half an hour later, I'm exhausted and the headache is back in full force.

"Should I get the nurse?" Macy asks, walking behind me, arms outstretched to catch me as I make my way to the bed. "I think I should get the nurse."

I groan as I climb under my cool sheets. "Let's give it a little while longer."

"I don't think—"

"Older-cousin prerogative." I shoot her a grin I'm far from feeling and snuggle onto my pillow. "If I'm not better in the morning, we'll call the nurse."

"Are you sure?" Macy dances from foot to foot as though unsure what to do.

"Considering I've had more than enough attention since I got to this school? Yes. Definitely."

She doesn't look happy by my refusal, but eventually she nods.

I drift in and out of sleep as my cousin washes her face and changes into her pajamas. But right around the time she turns off the light and crawls into bed, another wave of nausea rolls over me. I ride it out, trying to ignore how much I wish my mom were here to baby me a little, and eventually fall into a fitful sleep, one I don't wake from until an alarm blares at six thirty the next morning. It goes off just as abruptly as someone hits Snooze.

I wake up disoriented, trying to remember where I am and whose godawful alarm was beeping in my ear. Then it all comes flooding back. After one additional trip to the bathroom around three to dry heave my guts up, the nausea receded, which was a giant plus. And everything else feels okay now-my head has stopped spinning, and while my throat feels dry, it doesn't hurt, either.

Huh. Looks like the internet was right about the whole twenty-four to forty-eight hours to acclimate thing. I'm good as new.

At least until I sit up and realize the rest of my body is another story. Nearly every muscle I have aches like I've just climbed Denali—after running a marathon. I'm pretty sure it's just dehydration combined with how tense I was yesterday, but either way, I'm in no mood to get up. I'm certainly in no mood to put on a happy face for my first day of classes.

I lie back down and pull the covers over my head, trying to decide what I want to do. I'm still lying there ten minutes later when Macy wakes up with a grumble.

The first thing she does is slap at her alarm until it stops again—something I am eternally grateful for, considering she picked the most grating, annoying sound ever created to wake up to-but it takes her only a second to climb out of bed and come over to me.

"Grace?" she whispers softly, like she wants to check on me

but doesn't want to wake me up at the same time.

"I'm okay," I tell her. "Just sore."

"Yuck. That's probably dehydration." She crosses to the fridge in the corner of the room and pulls out a pitcher of water. She pours two glasses and then hands me one as she settles back onto her bed. She spends a minute texting—Cam, I figure—before tossing her phone aside and looking at me. "I have to go to my classes today—I've got tests in three of them—but I'll come back and check on you when I can."

I'm pretty much loving her assumption that I'm not going to class, so I don't argue. Except to say, "You don't have to go out of your way to check on me. I'm feeling much better."

"Good, then you can consider this a mental health day, of the Holy crap, I just moved to Alaska! variety."

"There's an actual mental health day for that?" I tease, moving around until I'm sitting up with my back against the wall.

Macy snorts. "There are whole mental health *months* for that. Alaska's not easy."

It's my turn to snort. "No kidding. I've been here less than forty-eight hours and I've already figured that out."

"That's just because you're afraid of wolves," she teases.

"And bears," I admit without a flicker of embarrassment. "As any sane person should be."

"You have a point." She grins. "You should take the day and

do whatever you want. Read a book, watch some trash TV, eat my stash of junk food if your stomach feels up to it. Dad will let your teachers know you'll be starting tomorrow instead of today."

I hadn't even thought of Uncle Finn. "Will your dad be okay with me skipping class?"

"He's the one who suggested it."

"How does he know—?" I break off when a knock sounds at the door. "Who—?"

"My dad," Macy says as she crosses the room and throws open the door with a flourish. "Who else?"

Except it's not Uncle Finn at all. It's Flint, who takes one look at Macy in her tiny nightshirt and me in last night's dress and smeared makeup and starts grinning like a dork.

"Looking good, ladies." He gives a low whistle. "Guess you decided to take the tea party up a notch or four last night, huh?"

"Wouldn't you like to know," Macy taunts as she makes a beeline for the bathroom and the privacy it affords. I don't bother to answer, just stick my tongue out at him. He laughs and raises his eyebrows in response.

"I would like to know," Flint tells me as he crosses over to sit on the end of my bed. "Where'd you run off to? And why?"

Because telling him the whole reason involves trying to explain my bizarre reaction to Jaxon—not to mention everything that came after—I settle for part of the truth. "The altitude really started getting to me. I felt like I was going to throw up, so I came back to the room."

That wipes the smile off his face. "How are you now? Altitude sickness isn't anything to fool around with. Can you breathe okay?"

"I can breathe fine. I swear," I add when he doesn't look convinced. "I'm feeling almost normal today. Just had to get used to the mountains, I guess."

"Speaking of mountains." Flint's appealing grin is back. "That's why I came by. A bunch of us are having a snowball fight after dinner tonight. Thought you might want to join in... if you feel okay, I mean."

"A snowball fight?" I shake my head. "I don't think I should." "Why not?"

"Because I don't even know how to make a snowball, let alone how to throw one." 1:22-cv-02435-LLS-SN Document 276-31 Filed 11/22/23 Page 124 of

pack it into a ball, and then you throw it at the nearest person."
He uses his hands to mime his words. "It's not exactly hard."

I stare at him, unconvinced.

"Come on, New Girl. Give it a try. I promise it'll be fun."

"Careful, Grace." Macy comes out of the bathroom, her hair wrapped in a towel. "Never trust a..." She trails off when Flint turns to her, brows raised.

"They're having a snowball fight after class today," I tell her. "He wants us to join." He hadn't invited Macy in so many words, but there's no way I'm going without her. And from the sudden smile on her face, I'm guessing I made the right choice.

"Seriously? We have to go, Grace. Flint's snowball fights are legendary around here."

"That doesn't exactly raise my confidence level, considering I have no idea what I'm doing."

"It'll be fine," they both say at the same time.

It's my turn to raise my brows as I look back and forth between them.

"Trust me," Flint implores. "I'll take good care of you."

"Don't trust him," Macy tells me. "Put a snowball in that boy's hand and he's utterly diabolical. But that doesn't mean it won't be fun."

I still think it's a bad idea, but Flint and Macy are my only two actual friends at Katmere. Who knows what will happen with Lia, and as for Jaxon... Jaxon is a lot of things, but I definitely wouldn't call him a friend. Or even friendly, for that matter.

"Okay, fine," I give in gracefully. "But if I end up dying in the middle of the fight, I'm going to haunt both of you forever."

"I'm pretty sure you'll survive," Macy assures me.

Flint, on the other hand, just winks. "And if not, I can think of worse ways to spend eternity."

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and drops a kiss on my cheek. "See you later, New Girl." And then he's gone, slipping out the door without a backward glance.

I'm left with a wide-eyed, openmouthed Macy, who is all

but clapping her hands in delight over one little peck. And the sad knowledge that no matter how adorable Flint is, he doesn't make me feel anything close to what Jaxon does.

So Hell Actually *Can* Freeze Over

id he..." Macy gasps out after he shuts the door behind him.

"It's not a big deal," I assure her.

"Flint just..." Apparently the word is still failing her, because she taps her cheek in the same spot where Flint kissed mine.

"It's not a big deal," I say again. "It's not like he planted one on me or anything. He was just being friendly."

"He's never been friendly like that to me. Or anyone else I've seen."

"Yeah, well, you've got a boyfriend. He's probably afraid Cam will kick his ass."

Macy laughs. She actually laughs, which...okay. The idea of her thin, lanky boyfriend kicking Flint's ass does seem a little absurd. But still, shouldn't she at least *pretend* to defend him?

"You want me to talk to him?" I tease. "See if he'll kiss you next time?"

"Of course not! I'm very happy with Cam and his kisses, thank you. I'm just saying, Flint likes you." She grabs a brush, starts running it through her hair.

Despite her words, there's something in her tone that has me

narrowing my eyes. "Wait. Do you have a crush on Flint for real?"

"Of course I don't. I love Cam." She avoids looking me in the eye as she grabs some product.

"Yeah, because that's real convincing." I roll my eyes. "Look, if you want to be with Flint, shouldn't you just break up with Cam and go for it?"

"I don't want to be with Flint."

"Mace-"

"I'm serious, Grace. Maybe I used to have a crush on him, way back in ninth grade or something. But that was a long time ago, and it doesn't matter anymore."

"Because of Cam." I watch her face closely in the mirror as she starts to style her short, colorful hair.

"Because I love Cam, yes," she says as she spikes up a few strands. "And also because it's not like that here."

"Not like what?"

"The different groups. They don't mix much."

"Yeah, I noticed that at the party. But just because they *don't* doesn't mean they *can't*, right? I mean, if you like Flint and he likes you—"

"I don't like Flint," she groans. "And he definitely doesn't like me.

And if I did like him, it wouldn't matter anyway, because..."

"Because what? He's popular?"

She sighs, shakes her head. "It's more than that."

"More than what? I'm beginning to feel like I've fallen into Mean Girls, Alaska version or something."

A knock sounds on the door before she can answer.

"Exactly how many people stop by your room before seven thirty in the morning anyway?" I joke as I cross to the door. Macy doesn't answer, just kind of shrugs and grins as she starts on her makeup.

I pull open the door to find my uncle looking down at me

worriedly. "How are you feeling? Macy said you were throwing up last night."

"I'm better, Uncle Finn. The nausea's gone and so is the headache."

"You're sure?" He gestures for me to climb back into my bed, so I do—a little gratefully, if I'm being honest. I've gotten so little sleep the last two nights that I feel like I'm in a fog, even if the altitude sickness has finally gone away.

"Good." He puts a hand on my forehead, like he's testing if I have a fever.

I start to crack a joke about altitude sickness not being a virus, but as he follows the hand on my forehead with a kiss to the top of my head, I get choked up. Because right now, with his eyebrows furrowed and his mouth curled into a frown that only makes his dimples more apparent, Uncle Finn looks so much like my dad that it takes every ounce of willpower I have not to cry.

"I still think Macy's right," he continues, oblivious to how broken I suddenly feel. "You should spend the day resting and start class tomorrow. Losing your parents, the move, Katmere Academy, Alaska—it's a lot to get used to, even without altitude sickness."

I nod but look away before he can see the emotion in my eyes.

He must recognize my struggle, because he doesn't say anything else. Just pats my hand before wandering back to the built-in vanity where Macy is still getting ready.

They talk, but they keep their voices so low that I can't hear anything, so I just tune it all out. I crawl back into bed, pull my covers up to my chin. And wait for the pain of missing my parents to pass.

I don't plan to fall asleep, but I do anyway. The next time I wake up, it's after one, and my stomach is grumbling pretty much nonstop. This time, though, the discomfort is because it's

been more than twenty-four hours since I've put anything that even resembles food into it.

There's a jar of peanut butter and a box of crackers on top of the fridge, and I glom onto both of them. A ton of peanut butter and an entire sleeve of crackers later and I finally feel human again.

I also feel trapped—inside this room and inside the school.

I try to ignore the restlessness, try to watch one of my favorite shows on Netflix or read the magazine I didn't finish on the plane. I even text Heather, though I know she's at school, hoping she can message back and forth with me for a while. Except—according to the one text she does manage to send back—she's about to take a calculus test, so definitely no distraction there.

Nothing else I try sticks, either, so finally I decide to just go for it. Maybe a walk around the Alaskan wilderness is exactly what I need to clear my head.

But deciding to go for a walk and actually getting ready for one are two very different things up here. I take a quick shower and then—because I'm a total newbie—I google how to dress for an Alaskan winter. Turns out the answer is *very* carefully, even when it's only November.

Once I pull up a site that looks reputable, the clothes Macy made sure I have make a lot more sense. I start with the wool tights she got me and one of my tank tops, then add a layer of long underwear—pants and shirt. After the underwear, I slip into fleece pants in hot pink (of course) and a fleece jacket in gray. The site gives me the option of another, heavier jacket to go over this one, but it's nowhere near as cold as it's going to get in a couple of months, so I decide to skip it and go straight for the hat, scarf, gloves, and two pairs of socks. Finally, I finish with the down-filled hooded parka my uncle got me and the pair of snow boots rated for Denali that are at the bottom of my closet.

A quick look in the mirror tells me I look as ridiculous as I feel.

But I figure I'll look even more ridiculous if I freeze to death on my second full day in Alaska, so I ignore the feeling. Besides, if I end up getting really warm during my walk, I can take off the fleece layer—or so the online guide suggests, as sweat is the enemy up here. Apparently walking around in wet clothes can lead to hypothermia. So...just like everything else in this state.

Instead of texting her and interrupting one of her tests, I leave Macy a note telling her I'm going to explore the school grounds—I'm not foolish enough to actually wander out past the wall into the wilderness, where there are wolves and bears and God only knows what else.

Then I head out. As I walk down the stairs, I ignore pretty much everyone I come across—which is almost nobody, since most of the school is in class right now. I should probably feel guilty that I'm not, but to be honest, I just feel relieved.

Once I'm on the ground floor, I take the first outside door I can find and then nearly change my mind as the wind and cold all but slap me in the face.

Maybe I should have put on that extra layer after all...

It's too late now, so I pull my hoodie up over my head and duck my scarf-covered face down into my parka's high collar. Then I set out across the yard, despite the fact that every instinct I have is screaming at me to go back inside.

But I've always heard you're supposed to start something how you plan to end it, and I am *not* going to be a prisoner inside the school for the next year. Over my dead freaking body.

I shove my hands in my pockets and begin to walk.

At first, I'm so miserable that all I can think about is the cold and how it feels against my skin, despite the fact that nearly every inch of me is covered in multiple layers.

But the more I walk, the warmer I become, so I up my pace and finally get the chance to start looking around. The sun rose about four hours ago—at nearly ten a.m.—so this is my first daylight look at the wilderness.

I'm struck by how beautiful everything is, even here on the campus grounds. We're on the side of a mountain, so everything is sloped, which means I'm constantly walking up or down one hill or another—not easy, considering the altitude, but at least I'm breathing a lot easier than I was two days ago.

There aren't a lot of different plants here right now, but there are a bunch of evergreens lining the various walkways and clustered at different points around campus. They're a beautiful green against the backdrop of white snow that covers nearly everything out here.

Curious what it feels like—but not ridiculous enough to take off my gloves—I bend down and scoop up a handful of snow, then let it slip through my fingers just to see how it falls. When my hand is empty, I bend down and scoop up some more, then do what Flint said earlier and pat it into a ball.

It's easier than I thought it would be, and it takes only a few seconds before I'm hurling the snow as hard as I can at the nearest tree on the left side of where the path forks ahead. I watch with satisfaction as it hits the trunk and explodes, before heading toward the path just beyond it.

But as I walk closer to the tree, I realize I've never seen anything like its dark, twisted roots. Huge and gray and gnarled together in a chaotic mess that looks like something out of a really bad nightmare, they all but scream for passersby to beware. Add in the broken branches and ripped-up bark off the trunk and the thing looks like it belongs in the middle of a horror movie instead of Katmere's otherwise pristine campus.

I'm not going to lie. It gives me pause. I know it's ridiculous

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Turns out, it's a good choice, because as soon as I make my way around the first bend, I can see a bunch of buildings. I pause to look at most of them from a safe distance, since class is in session and the last thing I want is to be caught trying to peek in through the windows like some kind of weirdo.

being out here, I veer toward the sun-dappled path on the right

instead.

Besides, each cottage—and they do look like cottages—has a sign in front of it that names the building and says what it's used for.

I pause when I get to one of the larger ones. It's labeled Chinook: Art, and my heart speeds up a little just looking at it. I've been sketching and painting since I understood crayons can do more than color in coloring books—and part of me wants nothing more than to run up the snow-lined path and throw open the door, just to see what kind of art studio they have out here that I can work in.

I settle for pulling out my phone and taking a quick pic of the sign. I'll google the word "chinook" later. I know it means "wind" in at least one native Alaskan language, but it will be fun to figure out which one.

I kind of want to know what *all* the words mean, so as I continue walking past the different outlying buildings—some larger than others—I snap a picture of each sign so I can look up the words later. Plus, I figure it'll help me remember where everything is, since I don't have a clue what rooms my classes are in yet.

I'm actually a little concerned about having too many classes out here, because what am I supposed to do? Run back to my room and get all these clothes on in between classes? If so, exactly how long are the passing periods here at Katmere? Because the six minutes I got at my old school isn't exactly going to cut it.

When I reach the end of the scattered row of buildings, I find a stone-lined trail that seems to wind its way around the grounds to the other side of the castle. A weird sense that I should turn around settles across my shoulders—kind of like what I felt at the library last night—and I pause for a second.

But I know when I'm letting my imagination get the better of me—that tree back there really spooked me—so I shake off the feeling and head down the trail.

But the farther I get from the main building, the worse the wind gets, and I pick up my pace to try to stay warm. So much for getting too hot and taking off a layer like that website suggested. Pretty sure the threat of turning into a Grace-flavored Popsicle gets a little more real with every second that passes.

Still, I don't turn back. At this point, I think I've circled more than half the grounds, which means I'm closer to the main castle if I keep going forward instead of heading back the way I came. So I pull my scarf a little more tightly around my face, shove my hands deep into my coat pockets, and keep going.

I head by a few more clumps of trees, a pond that is completely frozen over that I would love to ice skate on if I can manage to balance with all these clothes on, and a couple more small buildings. One is labeled Shila: Shop and the other says Tanana: Dance Studio over the door.

The cottage names are cool, but the classes they house surprise me a little. I don't know what I expected of Katmere Academy, but I guess it wasn't that it would have everything a regular high school has and so much more.

Admittedly, my only knowledge of rich boarding schools comes from my mom's old DVD of *Dead Poets Society* she

made me watch with her once a year. But in that movie, Welton Academy was super strict, super harsh, and super stuck-up. So far, Katmere Academy seems to be only one of the three.

The wind is getting worse, so once again I pick up my pace,

following the trail past a bunch of larger trees. These aren't evergreens, their leaves long gone and their branches coated in frost and dripping with icicles. I pause to study a few of them because they're beautiful, and because the light refracting through them sends rainbows dancing on the ground at my feet. I'm charmed by this little bit of whimsy, so much that I don't

even mind the wind for a second because it's what's making the rainbows dance. Eventually, though, I get too cold to stand still and make my way out of the trees to find another frozen pond. This one is obviously meant as a place people can hang out, because there are a bunch of seats around it, along with a snow-topped gazebo several yards away.

I take a couple of steps toward the gazebo, thinking I might sit down and rest for a minute, before I realize that it's already occupied by Lia—and *Jaxon*.

16

Sometimes Keeping Your Enemies Close Is the Only Thing that Prevents Hypothermia

I swore to myself that I wouldn't go running like a scared rabbit the next time I saw Jaxon, but this doesn't exactly seem like the time to hang around. Not when everything about their conversation screams *intense*. And—more importantly—private.

The way his and Lia's bodies are angled toward each other but aren't actually touching.

The rigidness of their shoulders.

How they're both completely wrapped up in whatever the other one is saying.

There's a part of me that wishes I were closer, wishes I could hear what they're talking about even though it is *absolutely none* of my business. Still, any people who look as grim and angry as these two do obviously have some kind of problem, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to know what it is.

I'm not sure why it matters so much to me, except there's an intimacy to their fighting that makes my stomach hurt. Which is absurd, considering I barely know Jaxon. And considering that two of the four times we've run into each other, he's blown past

me like I don't even exist.

That in and of itself is a pretty big hint that he wants nothing to do with me.

Except I keep remembering the look on his face when he chased those guys away from me the first night. The way his pupils were all blown out when he touched my face and wiped the drop of blood from my lips.

The way his body brushed against mine and it felt like everything inside me was holding its breath, just waiting for a chance to come alive.

We didn't feel like strangers then.

Which is probably why I keep watching him and Lia, against my better judgment.

They're arguing fiercely now, so much so that I can hear their raised voices, even as far away as I am. I'm not close enough to actually make out the words, but I don't need to know what they're saying to know just how furious they both are.

And that's before Lia lashes out at him, her open palm cracking against his scarred cheek hard enough to have Jaxon's head flying back. He doesn't hit her in return. In fact, he doesn't do anything at all until her palm comes flying at his face again.

This time, he catches her wrist in his hand and holds tight as she struggles to pull away. She's screaming full-out now, harsh sounds of rage and agony that claw their way inside me and bring tears to my eyes.

I know those sounds. I know the agony that causes them and the rage that makes it impossible to contain them. I know how they come from deep inside and how they leave your throat—and your soul—shredded in their wake.

Instinctively, I take a step toward her—toward them—galvanized by Lia's pain and the barely leashed violence that hangs in the air between them. But the wind picks up as I take

that first step, and suddenly they're both turning and staring at me with flat black eyes that send a chill straight through me. A chill that has nothing to do with the cold and everything to do with Jaxon and Lia and the way they're looking at me.

Like they're the predators and I'm the prey they can't wait to sink their teeth into.

I tell myself that I'm just spooked, but it doesn't help me shake the weird feeling, even as I give them both a little wave. I thought Lia and I might be becoming friends yesterday especially when she suggested doing mani-pedis together but it's obvious that friendship doesn't extend to whatever is happening here. Which is fine. The last thing I want to do is get in the middle of a fight between two people who obviously have some kind of history together. But I also don't want to leave them alone if their fight has deteriorated to her hitting him and him grabbing her in self-defense.

All of which leaves me unsure of what I'm supposed to do now, stuck where I am, an awkward guard staring at both of them in an effort to prevent I-don't-know-what while they stare right back at me.

But when Jaxon drops Lia's wrist and takes a couple of steps toward me, the same panic that hit me yesterday at the party slams through me again. As does the same odd fascination I've had from the beginning. I don't know what it is about him, but every time I catch sight of him, I feel something tug at me I can't identify, something I have no ability to explain.

He advances a few more steps, and my heart kicks up another notch or fifty. Still, I stand my ground—I ran from Jaxon once. I'm not going to do it a second time.

But then Lia reaches out, grabbing him, holding him back, pulling him toward her. The dangerous look fades from her eyes (though not from his) until it's almost like it was never there, and

she waves at me enthusiastically. "Hi, Grace! Come join us."

in, Grace: Come join us

Ummm, no thanks. Not in a million years. Not when every instinct I have is screaming at me to flee, even though I don't know why.

So instead of moving forward, I give her another little wave and call, "Actually, I've got to get back to my room before Macy sends out another search party. I just wanted to explore a little bit before I start classes tomorrow. Have a good afternoon!"

The last seems like major overkill, considering the fury I sense between them, but I tend to either clam up or babble when I'm nervous, so all in all, it's not a *terrible* performance. Or at least that's what I tell myself as I turn and start walking away as fast as I can without actually running.

Every step is a lesson in self-control as I have to force myself not to look back over my shoulder to see if Jaxon is still watching me. The prickle at the back of my neck says he is, but I ignore it.

Just like I ignore the weird feeling inside me that has shown up every time I've seen him. I assure myself it's nothing, that it doesn't matter. Because no way am I about to crush on a boy this complicated.

Still, the urge to turn around stays with me—right up until Jaxon appears by my side, eyes gleaming with interest and sexy-af hair blowing in the wind.

"What's the rush?" he asks, scooting in front of me so that he's directly in my path, walking backward so we're face-to-face and I'm forced to slow down or bump into him.

"Nothing." I look down so I don't have to look him in the eye. "I'm cold."

"So which is it? Nothing?" He stops walking, which forces me to do the same, then puts a finger under my chin and presses up until I relent and meet his gaze. He flashes me a crooked little smile that does unspeakable things to my heart—the whole reason I'd been trying not to look at him to begin with. Especially considering what I just saw between him and Lia. "Or the cold?"

If I look closely, I can still see the imprint of her hand on his scarred cheek. It pisses me off, more than it should considering I barely know the guy. Which is why I take a deliberate step to the side and say, "The cold. So if you'll excuse me..."

"You're wearing an awful lot of clothes," he tells me—confirming that I look as ridiculous as I feel—as he moves until he's once again in front of me. "You sure the cold's not just an excuse?"

"I don't need to make excuses to you." And yet I am—making excuses and trying to run away from him and what I just saw. Trying to run away from all the things he makes me feel when all I really want to do is grab on to him and hold on tight. It's an absurd thought, an absurd feeling, but that doesn't make it any less real.

He tilts his head, quirks a brow, and somehow has my heart beating that much faster because of it. "Don't you?"

This is the part where I should start walking. The part where I should do a lot of things, *any*thing, that doesn't involve throwing myself at Jaxon Vega like I'm the game-deciding pitch at the World Series. But I don't do that.

Instead, I stay where I am. Not because Jaxon is blocking my way—which he is—but because everything inside me is responding to everything inside him. Even the danger. *Especially* the danger, though I've never been that girl before, the one who takes risks just to see how they feel.

Maybe that's why—instead of moving around him and running back to the castle like I should—I look him straight in the eye and say, "No. I don't answer to you."

He laughs. He actually laughs, and it's the most arrogant

thing I've ever heard.
"Everyone answer.

"Everyone answers to me...eventually."

Oh. My. God. What an asshat.

I roll my eyes and step around him, moving up the path with a stiff back and a fast pace that all but screams for him not to follow. Because when he says stuff like that, it doesn't matter how drawn to him I feel. I've got better things to do than waste my time on a guy who thinks he's God's gift to everyone.

Except Jaxon must not be as adept at reading body language as I thought—or he just doesn't care. Either way, he doesn't let me go like I expect. Instead, he starts walking right alongside me again, keeping pace no matter how hard and fast I push myself. It's annoying as fuck, even without the obnoxious smirk he

doesn't try to hide. Or the multiple sidelong glances that precede the words: "Hanging out with Flint Montgomery isn't exactly keeping your head down."

I ignore him, do my best Dory impression. *Just keep walking, just keep walking.*

"I'm only saying," he continues when I don't respond, "making friends with a dra—" He breaks off, clears his throat before trying again. "Making friends with a guy like Flint is..."

"What?" I turn on him, frustration racing through me. "Being friends with Flint is what exactly?"

"Like painting a target on your back," he answers, looking a little taken aback by my anger. "It's pretty much the opposite of keeping a low profile."

"Oh, really? So what exactly is hanging out with you, then?"

His face goes blank, and I don't think he's going to answer.

But eventually, he says, "Utter and complete stupidity."

Not the answer I was expecting, especially from someone as arrogant and annoying as he can be. The blunt honesty of it slips past my defenses, though. Has me answering when I didn't

think there was anything else to say. "Yet here you are."

"Yeah." His dark, bemused eyes search my face. "Here I am."

Silence echoes between us—dark, loaded, unfathomable—even as tension stretches taut as a circus high wire.

I should go.

He should go.

Neither of us moves. I'm not sure I even breathe.

Finally, Jaxon breaks the stillness—though not the tension—by taking a step closer to me. Then another and another, until the only thing that separates us is the bulky weight of my coat and the thinnest sliver of air.

Chills that have nothing to do with the cold and everything to do with Jaxon's proximity dance up and down my spine.

My heart pounds.

My head swims.

My mouth goes desert dry.

And the rest of me doesn't fare much better...especially when Jaxon reaches for my gloved hand, rubs his thumb back and forth across my palm.

"What were you and Flint talking about?" he asks after a second. "At the party?"

"I honestly don't remember." Which sounds like a cop-out answer, but it's really just the truth. With Jaxon touching me, I'm lucky to remember my own name.

He doesn't challenge my words. But the corners of his lips tip up in a very self-satisfied smile as he murmurs, "Good."

His smirk jump-starts my brain—finally—and then it's my turn to ask a question. "What were you and Lia fighting about?"

I don't know what I expect—his gaze to go flat again, probably, or for him to tell me that it's none of my business. Instead, he says, "My brother," in a tone that doesn't ask for sympathy and warns that he won't permit it.

It's not the answer I was expecting, but as the very few pieces I have start fitting themselves together in my head, my heart plummets. "Was...was Hudson your brother?"

For the first time, I see genuine surprise in his eyes. "Who told you about Hudson?"

"Lia did. Last night when we were having tea. She mentioned that—" I break off at the glacial coldness in his eyes.

"What did she tell you?" The words are quiet, but that only makes them hit harder. As does the way he drops my hand.

I swallow, then finish in a rush. "Just that her boyfriend died. She didn't say anything about you at all. I just took a guess that her boyfriend might also be..."

"My brother? Yeah, Hudson was my brother." The words drip ice, in an effort—I think—to keep me from knowing how much they hurt. But I've been there, have spent weeks doing the same thing, and he doesn't fool me.

"I'm sorry," I tell him, and this time I'm the one who reaches for him. The one whose fingers whisper over his wrist and the back of his hand. "I know it doesn't mean anything, that it doesn't touch the kind of grief you're feeling. But I truly am sorry you're hurting."

For long seconds, he doesn't say anything. Just watches me with those dark eyes that see so much and show so little. Finally, when I'm searching my brain for something else to say, he asks, "What makes you think I'm hurting?"

"Aren't you?" I challenge.

More silence. Then, "I don't know."

I shake my head. "I don't know what that means."

He shakes his head, then moves back several feet. My hand clenches, missing the feel of him under my fingers.

"I have to go."

"Wait." I know better, but I reach for him again. I can't help

it. "Just like that?"

He lets me hold his hand for one second, two. Then he turns and walks back down the path to the pond so fast, it's nearly a run.

I don't even bother trying to keep up. If I've learned anything in the last couple of days, it's that when Jaxon Vega wants to disappear, he disappears, and there's nothing I can do about it. Instead, I turn in the other direction and head back to the castle.

Now that I have a set destination in mind, the walk seems much faster than my original wandering did. But I still can't shake the uncomfortable feeling that I'm being watched. Which is absurd, considering Jaxon went in the other direction and Lia disappeared right after her argument with him.

The feeling stays with me the whole time I'm outside. And something else is niggling at me, too, something I can't quite figure out. At least not until I reach the warmth and safety of the castle—and my room. It's as I'm peeling off all the layers I'm wearing that it finally hits me.

Neither Lia nor Jaxon was wearing a jacket.

17

It's Discretion, not Diamonds, That's a Girl's Best Friend

ou sure you're up for this?" Macy asks several hours later as I grab a sweatshirt from my closet.

Is she kidding? "Not even a little bit."

"That's what I figured." She heaves a huge sigh. "We could cancel if you want. Tell everyone you're still not over the altitude sickness."

"And have Flint think I'm chicken? No thank you." I actually couldn't care less if Flint thinks I'm afraid or not. But Macy has been so excited about this snowball fight that there's no way I'm going to take it away from her. The fact that she offered to cancel because she knows I'm not into it only makes me more determined to go. "We're doing this snowball fight and we're going to..."

"Kick some butt?"

"I was thinking more along the lines of not make complete and total fools of ourselves, but way to think positive."

She laughs, as I intended her to, then bounds off the bed and starts layering up big-time. Which...finally, someone at this ridiculous school who has some sense. Between the jerks I met the first night and then Jaxon and Lia, I'm beginning to think

everyone in this place has some bizarre immunity to cold. Like maybe they're aliens and I'm the ignorant and fragile human living among them.

After we both finish getting dressed in—I counted this time—six layers, she herds me toward the door. "Come on, we don't want to be late or we'll totally get ambushed."

"Ambushed. With snowballs. Sounds fantastic." San Diego has never looked so good.

"Just wait. You're going to love it. Plus, it'll give you a chance to meet all of Flint's friends." She checks her makeup one more time in the mirror by the door, then all but shoves me into the hallway.

"All of Flint's friends?" I ask as we make our way through the halls. "Exactly how many people are going to be at this thing?"

"I don't know. At least fifty."

"Fifty people? At a snowball fight?"

"Maybe more. Probably more."

"How does that even work?" I query.

"Does it matter?" she answers, brows raised.

"Yes, it matters. I mean, how can you possibly keep track of that many people trying to throw things at you?"

"I don't think you keep track of them so much as try to flatten everyone you come across without being flattened yourself."

"Maybe you're right. Maybe the altitude sickness is coming back."

"Too late." She links her arm through mine and grins. "We're almost there."

"So can you be a little more specific about who all is going to be there? Anyone I've already met—I mean, besides Flint?"

"I don't know if Lia will be there. Cam won't—he and Flint don't really get along. It's a...thing."

I think about asking exactly what kind of thing she's

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Cam. There's only one person I'm trying to find out about, and since Macy isn't getting there herself, I guess I really am going to have to ask.

"How about Jaxon?" I keep my voice light even though, after our encounter earlier, my heart is pounding at the mere mention of his name. "Is he going to be there?"

"Jaxon Vega?" By the time she gets to the second syllable of Jaxon's name, her voice is little more than a squeak.

"He's the one we saw in the hall that first day, right?"

"Yeah. Um...yeah." Macy gives up any pretense of chill—and of walking, as it turns out. Instead, she turns to me, hands on her hips, and demands, "Why are you asking about Jaxon?"

"I don't know. We've met a couple of times, and I just wondered if he was into snowball fights."

"You've met *Jaxon Vega* a couple of times? How exactly did you meet, considering I've been with you almost all the time since you got here?"

"I don't know, just walking around the school. It was only a few times."

"A few times?" Her eyes almost bug out of her head. "That's more than a couple. Where? When? How?"

"Why are you being so weird about this?" I'm seriously beginning to regret bringing Jaxon up. I mean, she was freaked out over Flint, but it was a fun kind of freaked out. Right now, it looks more like she's going to blow a gasket. "He was in the hallway; I was in the hallway. It just kind of happened."

"Things don't *just happen* with Jaxon. He's not exactly known for being talkative with anyone outside of—" She stops abruptly.

"Outside of what?" I prompt.

"I don't know. Just..."

"Just?" I ask. She smiles a little sickly but doesn't say anything

else, and it annoys me. Like, seriously annoys me. "Why do you keep doing that?"

"Doing what?"

"You start sentences and then never finish them. Or you start to say something and halfway through change what you were saying to something else entirely."

"I don't-"

"You do. All the time. And honestly, it's beginning to feel a little weird. Like there's some kind of secret I'm not supposed to know. What's going on?"

"That's ridiculous, Grace." She looks at me like I'm a few snowflakes short of a snowball. "Katmere is just, you know, full of all kinds of weird cliques and social rules. I didn't want to bore you with them all."

"Because you'd rather I commit social suicide?" I arch my brow at her.

She rolls her eyes. "Social suicide is the last thing you need to worry about here."

It's the first real thing she's said since we started this conversation, and I jump on it. "So what do I have to worry about, then?"

Macy sighs, low and long and just a little sad. But then she looks me in the eye and says, "All I was going to say is that Jaxon's not very friendly with people who aren't in the Order."

"The Order? What's that?"

"It's nothing, really." When I keep looking at her, silently pushing her to continue, she sighs again, then adds, "It's just a nickname we gave the most popular boys at school because they're always together."

I think about the guys Jaxon walked into the party with and the ones who were with him in the hall when Flint was carrying me to my room. At the time, I remember thinking that Jaxon looked like the leader, but I didn't think much of it. I was too busy trying not to stare at him.

Based on my recollections, Macy's explanation is reasonable. Still, there's something about the way she says it—and the way she's looking everywhere but in my eyes—that makes me think there's more to the story than she's letting on.

Although, standing in the middle of the hallway doesn't seem like the best place to keep pushing at her, especially since we really are going to be late if we don't get moving.

With that in mind, I start walking and Macy does, too, but she sticks close to my side. I give her a weird look, wondering what she's up to, at least until she asks in a kind of stage whisper, "Have you met the others, too?"

"The other guys in the Order?" I feel a little ridiculous just saying the name out loud. I mean, they're twelfth-grade students at a boarding school, not running a monastery in Tibet. "No. I've only met Jaxon."

"Only? You mean he was alone?" Now she doesn't just look worried; she looks downright sick.

"Yeah. So?"

"Oh God! What did he do? Are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

"Jaxon?" I can't keep the surprise from my voice.

"Of course Jaxon! That is who we're talking about, right?"

"No, he didn't hurt me. Why would you even think that?"

She throws her hands in the air, frustration and fear evident in every line of her body. "Because he's Jaxon. He's a one-man demolition crew. It's what he does!"

"He was..." I shake my head, try to think of the right word to describe our interactions. Then go with generic because I figure Macy won't get it anyway. "Most of the time he was actually kind of...interesting."

"Interesting?" This time she looks at me like I just said I

wanted to bodysurf the Alaskan tundra. "Okay, I'm confused. Are you sure we're talking about the same Jaxon?" She pulls me into the nearest alcove, then grabs my hands and squeezes them tightly. "Really tall, really gorgeous, *really scary*? Black hair, black eyes, black clothes, and a smoking-hot body? Plus the arrogance of a rock star...or the self-proclaimed dictator of a not-so-small country?"

I've got to admit, it's a pretty good description—especially the *arrogant* part. And the *really gorgeous* part, even if it doesn't take into account a lot of the things that make him so attractive. Like his eyes that see way too much and the way his voice gets all dark and growly when he expects things to go his way. Not to mention the thin scar that turns him from merely pretty to sexy. And also scary as hell. "Yeah, that's him."

"You know you don't have to lie, right? You can tell me what happened. I swear I won't tell anyone if you don't want me to."

"You won't tell anyone what?" I'm thoroughly confused now. Because while it might have been a stretch to call Jaxon interesting, I can't imagine why the fact that I've met him is eliciting this kind of response from my cousin.

"What he did to you?" She starts looking me over, like she's searching for some proof that I survived a rabid Jaxon attack.

"He didn't *do* anything, Macy." A little impatient now, I pull my hands from hers. "I mean, he wasn't Gandhi. But he helped me out when I needed it, and he sure as hell didn't hurt me. Why is that so hard to believe?"

"Because Jaxon Vega isn't helpful to anyone. Ever."

"I don't believe that."

"Well, you should." She enunciates each word in an obvious attempt to make sure I listen to—and understand—what she's saying. "Because he's dangerous, Grace. *Very* dangerous, and you should stay as far away from him as you possibly can."

I start to tell her that he's not the dangerous one, but then I remember the way Marc and Quinn fell right into line the second he showed up. It was hard to miss the fear on their faces, and not just because he'd sent them flying across the room.

Now that I think back on it, they had been scared of him. Like, really scared.

"I'm serious. You need to be careful of him. If he really was helpful to you, it's only because he wants something. And even that seems strange, because Jaxon takes what he wants. Always has, always will."

I've been here three days and even I know that's not true. Which is probably why I say, "Jaxon's the one who kept Marc and Quinn from throwing me out in the snow, Macy. I don't think he did it because he wanted something from me."

"Wait. He's the one?"

"Yes, he is. Why would he do that if he's such a bad guy?"

"I don't know." She looks stunned. "But just because he helped you once doesn't mean he'll do it again. So be careful with him, okay?"

"He's not the one who tried to kill me."

She snorts. "Yeah, well, you've only been here a few days. Give it time."

"That's..." For long seconds, I trip over my tongue as I try to find a comeback that will show her how absurd she sounds. But in the end, I can't get past the annoyance her words cause and end up saying exactly what I'm thinking. "A really awful thing to say."

"Just because it's awful doesn't make it any less true." She gives me a no-nonsense look that seems incongruous with her normally effervescent personality. "You need to trust me on this."

"Macy..."

"I'm serious. Don't worry about me being too harsh." She

narrows her eyes at me in obvious warning. "And don't worry about Jaxon Vega. Unless you're trying to figure out how to stay as far away from him as possible."

Behind her, something catches my eye, and my mouth goes dry. "Yeah, well, that might be a problem." I barely manage to get the words out past my suddenly tight throat.

"And why is that exactly?"

And why is that exactly:

"Because I'm not going anywhere." Jaxon's low, amused voice cuts through my cousin's umbrage, has her eyes going wide and her skin draining of color. "And neither is Grace." 18

How Many Hot Guys Does it Take to Win a Snowball Fight?

acy squeaks—she actually squeaks—but Jaxon just raises his brows at me. The look on his face is a little amused and a lot wicked and my heart starts beating like a metronome on high.

At least until Macy hisses, "Seriously? You couldn't tell me he was there?"

"I didn't-"

"She didn't know." He looks me over from top to bottom, and for a second, just a second, a smile touches the depths of those obsidian eyes of his. "Braving the snow twice in one day? I've got to admit I'm impressed."

"Don't be too impressed. I still have to make it through the snowball fight in one piece."

The smile drops—from his face and his eyes—as quickly as it came. "You're playing Flint's game?"

It sounds more like an accusation than a question, though I don't know why. "Isn't that why you're here?"

"For a *snowball* fight?" He shakes his head, makes a dismissive sound deep in his throat. "I don't think so."

"Oh, well..." That got awkward fast. "Um. We should probably..."

"Get going," Macy finishes.

Jaxon ignores her as he braces a hand on the wall behind me. Then he leans in and, in a voice so low I have to strain to hear him, murmurs, "You're determined not to listen to me, aren't you?"

"I don't know what you mean," I whisper back, but I can't look him in the face as I say it. Not when I'm lying—I know exactly what he's talking about—and not when his breath is so warm and soft against my ear that I can feel it everywhere, even deep inside.

"It really is for your own good," he tells me, still standing way too close. Heat slams through me—at his words and his proximity and the orange and dark-water scent of him currently wrapping itself around me.

"What—" My voice breaks, my throat so tight and dry, I can barely force the words through it when I try again. "What is?"

"You shouldn't go to that snowball fight with Flint." He pulls back, his gaze catching and holding mine. "And you sure as hell shouldn't be wandering around the school grounds on your own. You're not *safe* here."

It's not the first time he's implied that Katmere is dangerous for me. And I get it. I do. Alaska is no picnic for the uninitiated. But I'm with Macy, on school grounds. No way is she going to let anything happen to me.

"I'll be fine." It's easier to breathe now that Jaxon's mouth isn't a scant inch from my ear, but finding words is still harder than it should be under his watchful gaze. "I'm not planning on wandering off tonight. I'll be with the group the whole time."

"Yeah." He doesn't sound impressed. "That's what I'm worried about."

"What do you mean?" I clarify. "I thought you'd be relieved I'm not planning on tackling any wild animals with my bare hands."

"It's not the wild animals I'm concerned about."

Before I can ask him what that means, Macy interjects again. "We should get going. We don't want to be late."

"Well, whatever you're concerned about, you shouldn't be," I tell him, refusing to be pulled away before I'm ready. "I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself. But if you want, you can join us."

"Join you." His tone implies I just suggested that we fly to Mars under our own power.

But I refuse to be dissuaded. Not when Jaxon is standing so close to me instead of pulling his usual disappearing act. "It'll be fun. And I'm sure Flint won't mind."

"You're sure he won't mind." He repeats my words, and again it isn't a question. He's back to seeming amused, though—at least if you don't look too closely at his eyes. They're flat now, completely empty in a way I haven't seen since he looked through me at the party. "Because I've got to tell you, I'm pretty sure he will."

"Why would he? He invited a ton of people." I turn to look at Macy, who has gone absolutely sheet white.

I roll my eyes at her, annoyed she seems so freaked out at the idea of hanging with Jaxon, but before I can say anything, Flint walks up behind me and puts his hands on my shoulders. "Hey, Grace. Looks like you're ready to get your snowball on."

"I am, actually." I turn and end up grinning at him because it's impossible not to. He's just that fun and that charming. Not to mention the fact that he's wearing a snow hat in the shape of a fire-breathing dragon that looks absolutely ridiculous. "In fact, I was trying to talk Jaxon into joining us."

"Oh really?" Flint's eyes go a kind of burning amber as he looks from me to Jaxon. "What do you say, Vega? Wanna fight?"

Flint's smiling, but even I can tell it's not a friendly invitation... and that's before three other guys in all black join us, arranging themselves in a semicircle right behind Jaxon. For the first time,

the phrase "got your back" makes sense to me, because it's very obvious that's why these guys are here. To have Jaxon's back. I just don't know from what.

These must be members of the infamous Order Macy was telling me about. And I can see why they got the nickname there's a closeness among the four of these guys that even I can't miss. A bond that seems to be about a lot more than simple friendship.

Flint feels it, too. I can tell by the way he stiffens and the way he shifts his weight forward onto his toes, like he's just waiting for Jaxon to throw the first punch. More, like he's hoping for it.

Which...no. Just no. I don't care if there's suddenly enough testosterone in our little alcove to start the next world war; it's not going to happen. At least not while Macy and I are standing directly in the middle.

"Come on." I grab my cousin's arm. "Let's go figure out a way to win this snowball fight."

That gets both Jaxon's and Flint's attention. "Those are big words coming from someone who never saw snow before she got here three days ago," Flint teases, and while the tension isn't gone, it's way lower than it was a few seconds ago-exactly as I intended.

"Yeah, well, you know me. All about the bravado." I keep a firm grip on Macy's arm as I start to maneuver around Jaxon and his friends.

"Is that what you call it?" Jaxon murmurs in my ear as I slide past him. Once more, his warm breath is against the side of my neck, and a shiver that has nothing to do with the cold works its way down my spine.

Our eyes meet, and for a second, just a second, the whole world seems to drop away. Macy, Flint, the other students who are laughing and chattering as they move past us on their way to the door all disappear until it's just Jaxon and me and the electricity that arcs between us.

My breath catches in my throat, my whole body grows warm, and it takes real, physical effort to stop myself from reaching out and touching him.

I think he must be having the same problem, because his hand comes up, hovers in the air between us for one long, infinite moment.

"Grace." It's barely a whisper, but still I feel it all the way inside myself. I wait, breath held, for him to say something—anything—else, but before he can, the front door flies open, letting in a huge gust of freezing air.

It breaks the spell, and suddenly we're just two people standing in a crowded hallway again. Disappointment wells inside me, especially when Jaxon takes a step back, his face set once again in inscrutable lines.

I wait for him to say something, but he doesn't. Instead, he just watches as Flint herds Macy and me toward the open door. As we cross the threshold, I raise my hand in a small goodbye wave.

I don't expect him to return it, and he doesn't. But just as I turn away to take my first step outside, he says, "Don't forget to build an arsenal."

They're pretty much the last words I expect to hear from him...or anyone, for that matter. "An arsenal?"

"It's the most important part of winning a snowball fight. Find a base you can protect and concentrate on building up your arsenal. Only attack when you're sure you have enough ammunition to win."

Snowballs. Here I was, convinced we had just shared a moment, and he's thinking about snowballs. Fan-freaking-tastic.

"Ummm...thanks for the advice?" I give him a WTF look.

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should take it." "Why don't you take it? Join me and the two of us can build

a bigger arsenal." He lifts a brow. "And here I thought that's exactly what I

have been doing." "What does that mean?" I demand.

But he's already turning away, already walking away, and

I'm left staring after him. As usual.

Damn it.

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Something tells me this boy—and his world-famous disappearing act—is going to be the death of me.

We Came, We Fought, I Froze

axon Vega, huh?" Flint asks as the cold slaps me in the face for the second time today.

"Don't start," I say, giving him the side eye.

"I'm not," he answers, holding both hands up in mock surrender. "I swear." He's silent for a minute or so as the three of us concentrate on trudging through the snow toward everyone else. And can I just say that I'm pretty sure Macy undersold the crowd when she said fifty people. Even in the weird civil twilight that surrounds us on all sides, it looks more like a hundred, maybe even the whole damn school—minus Jaxon and his friends, of course.

On the plus side, at least they're all wearing hats and scarves and coats...which I'm taking to mean that not everyone in this place is an actual alien. Thankfully.

"I just didn't know 'screwed-up and obnoxious' was your type, that's all."

I shoot him a glare. "I thought you weren't starting."

"I'm not. I'm just looking out for you. Jaxon is—"

"Not screwed up."

He laughs. "I notice you didn't even try to say he wasn't

obnoxious, though, did you? And no offense, Grace, but you're new here. You have no idea just how fucked-up he is."

"And you do?"

"Yeah. And so does Macy. Right, Mace?"

Macy doesn't answer, just keeps walking and pretends like she doesn't hear him. I'm beginning to wish I could do the same.

"All right, all right, I get it." Flint shakes his head. "I won't say anything else against the Chosen One. Except tell you to be careful."

"We're friends, Flint."

"Yeah, well, take it from someone who knows. Jaxon doesn't have friends."

I want to ask him what he means by that, considering Jaxon's got the Order, and they seem pretty damn close to me, but we've reached the first row of trees, where the others are gathered. Plus, I'm the one who just said I didn't want to talk about Jaxon. If I start asking questions, that gives Flint carte blanche to say whatever he wants, and that doesn't seem fair, since Jaxon isn't around to defend himself.

Flint walks into the middle of the group like he owns the place. Then again, judging from the way the others respond to him, maybe he does. It's not that they all come to attention, necessarily. It's just obvious that they all really want him to notice them...and they all really want to hear what he has to say.

I can't help wondering what that kind of popularity is like. I don't want it—would probably melt under the pressure of it in less than twenty-four hours. But I do wonder what it feels like. And how Flint feels about it.

I don't have long to dwell on my thoughts, though, because Flint gets started giving a quick rundown of the rules—starting with one that sounds an awful lot like *there are no rules*, except it's followed by the one that says if you get hit by five snowballs,

you're out—and then disperses the crowd. As the five-minute countdown starts, he grabs Macy's and my hands and starts running with us toward a large thicket of evergreen and aspen trees several hundred yards away.

"We've got two minutes to find a good spot," he says. "Another two and a half to get things together. Then it's open season."

"But if everyone finds a spot, who will we have to throw sno—"

"They won't," Flint and Macy interrupt me at the exact same time.

"Don't worry," Flint tells me as we finally reach the trees. "There will be plenty of people to wage war on."

Wage war? I can barely breathe. It's a combination of the high altitude and cold air, I know, but I can't help feeling selfconscious about the way I'm huffing and puffing. Especially since he and Macy both sound like they just finished a leisurely garden stroll.

"So what do we do now?" I ask, even though it's fairly obvious, considering Flint is already scooping up snow and making it into balls.

"Build up our arsenal." He gives me a wicked grin. "Just because I think Jaxon is a jackass doesn't mean the guy doesn't know strategy."

We spend the next couple of minutes making as many snowballs as we possibly can. I half expect Macy and Flint to outpace me here, too, but it turns out all those years of making pastries and patting dough into balls with my mother paid off, because I am an excellent snowball maker. Totally kick-ass. And I'm twice as fast as they are.

"Coming up on five minutes," Macy says, her phone ringing with a fifteen-second warning.

"Move, move," Flint calls out, even as he shoos me behind the closest tree.

Just in time, too, because as soon as Macy's phone screeches out the five-minute mark, all hell breaks loose.

People drop from the trees all around us, snowballs flying fast and furious in every direction. Others run by at breakneck speeds, lobbing them kamikaze-style at anyone within range.

One snowball whizzes right past my ear, and I breathe a sigh of relief until another one slams into my side—even with the tree, and Flint, for cover.

"That's one," I hiss, jerking to the right to avoid another snowball flying straight at me. It hits Flint in the shoulder instead, and he mutters a low curse.

"Are we going to hide back here all day?" Macy demands from where she's crouched at the base of a nearby tree. "Or are we going to get in this thing?"

"By all means," Flint says, gesturing for her to go first.

She rolls her eyes at him, but it takes her only a few seconds to scoop snow into a couple of giant snowballs. Then she's letting her snowballs fly with a giant war whoop that practically shakes the snow off the nearby branches, before running toward our arsenal to reload.

I follow her into the fray, a snowball clutched in my gloved hands as I wait for a perfect opportunity to use it.

The opportunity presents itself when one of the large guys from Flint's group comes barreling toward me, snowballs hidden in the bottom of the jacket he's turned into a carrying pouch. He sends them flying at me, one after another, but I manage to dodge them all. Then I throw my snowball as hard as I can, straight at him. It hits him in his very surprised face.

We've built up about a hundred snowballs in our arsenal, and we use them all as more and more people pour through the forest, looking for a place to hide as they catch their breath and try to make a few extra snowballs of their own.

I'm a little surprised at how close-knit the groups are—and how alliances transcend snowball teams and seem to revert back to the factions I noticed at the party yesterday. Even though members of Flint's clique are divided into duos and trios, they all seem to come together and watch one another's backs when someone from one of the other factions—whether it's the slender group dressed in bright jewel tones or the more muscular group that Marc and Quinn are currently fighting with—threatens one of them.

I also notice that one group is missing—Jaxon's. Not just the Order, which is definitely not here, but the whole black-clothed designer faction that presided over the party with such obvious disdain. Guess Jaxon was right when he said Flint didn't want him here. Part of me wants to try to figure out what is up with that, but right now I'm too busy dodging snowball volleys to do more than give it a passing thought.

It's total guerrilla warfare out here—fast and brutal and winner takes all. It's also the most fun I've had since my parents died, and probably even longer than that.

We exhaust our supply of snowballs pretty quickly, and then we're just like everyone else, running through the trees, trying to find cover as we fling snow at whoever's within reach.

I laugh like a hyena the whole time. Macy and Flint look bemused at first, but soon they're laughing with me—especially when one or the other of us gets hit.

It's after an ambush that leads to Macy getting her fourth hit and Flint and me getting our third ones that we decide to get serious. We find the biggest two trees we can to hide behind, and we drop to our knees, packing snowballs as quickly as possible. After we've got about thirty made, Flint yanks off his hat and scarf and starts piling them inside.

"What are you doing?" I demand. "You're going to freeze to death out here."

"I'm fine," he tells me as he turns his scarf into a kind of carrying pack. "This is our chance to win."

"How?" I ask. There's chaos all around us, and though the others haven't found our hiding spot yet, it's only a matter of time—probably a minute or two—before they do. And while we've got ammunition, there's also a lot fewer of us than there is of them.

"By climbing the trees," Macy tells me.

Before I can express my utter incredulity at the thought of climbing one of the gigantic, leafless aspens—the lowest branches are more than fifteen feet off the ground—she runs straight at the trunk of the closest tree, then jumps and kicks out hard enough to send herself soaring up several feet at an angle, arms extended, to grab the branch of a neighboring tree. She hangs there for a few seconds, swinging back and forth to gain momentum, then thrusts herself up and onto a nearby branch.

The whole thing takes about ten seconds.

"Did she just do parkour against that tree?" I ask Flint before turning to Macy. "Did you just parkour that tree?"

"I did," she says with a laugh, then reaches down to catch the hat full of snowballs Flint sends flying her way.

"That's freaking awesome. But if you guys expect me to be able to do that, I think we're all going to be disappointed."

"Don't worry, Grace," Flint tells me as he thrusts his snowball-packed scarf into my arms. "Just hold on to these for me, will you?"

"Of course. What are you going to—?" I let out a screech as he grabs onto me and throws me over his shoulder.

"Quiet down or you're going to give away our hiding place," he tells me as he starts climbing the tree like some Alaskan version of Spider-Man, hands and feet practically sticking to the tree's bark as he carries me up the gigantic trunk. "And don't drop the snowballs."

"You should have thought of that before you decided to hang me upside down," I snark at him. But I tighten my grip on the scarf.

I don't know how he's doing it, and I wouldn't believe it if I wasn't witnessing—or should I say experiencing—it for myself. But thirty seconds later, I'm straddling a tree branch, snowballs in hand, as I wait to ambush the first people who come by.

Flint's on a branch several feet above mine. It's high enough off the ground to make me whimper just looking up at him, but he's standing there with a huge grin on his face, like balancing on a snow-packed tree branch is the easiest thing in the world.

Which, to be clear, it definitely is not. And I know that because I'm *sitting* on one and I still feel like I could slip off at any second.

"Someone's coming!" Macy hisses from one tree over.

I glance down at the ground and realize she's right—Quinn, Marc, and two other guys are heading our way. They're moving stealthily instead of quickly, almost like they know we're here. And maybe they do—it's not like I was exactly quiet while Flint hauled me up this tree.

Either way, it doesn't matter, because all we need is for them to get a few steps closer and—

Bam. Flint sends a snowball soaring straight into the leader's chest. Macy follows up with a one-two shot to the guy in the back. Which leaves Marc and Quinn. Which I'm definitely not going to complain about. I send a volley of snowballs straight at them, one after another. I hit Marc twice and Quinn at least four times, which—if their curse-laden complaints are anything to go by—knocks them completely out of the game. Something I'm also not going to complain about.

Flint is all but crowing in triumph as he dispatches a second group that made the mistake of coming this way, and Macy takes care of a couple of loners trying to sneak in from behind us. I restock from the thick snow on the branches and wait for whoever comes next.

Turns out it's a couple of girls dressed in teal and navy outerwear, who look like they're having about as much fun as I do at the dentist.

I think about pulling my punches—no reason to make them even more miserable—but I figure it's only putting off the inevitable. The faster I knock them out of the game, the faster they can head back to the castle. And the faster we can win this thing.

I reach for my last three snowballs and am just waiting for them to come within range when a powerful wind comes up and knocks me off balance. I make a grab for the tree trunk and manage to hold on while the wind shakes the whole tree.

Flint curses and makes a grab for the trunk, too. Then calls to me, "Hold on, Grace! I'll be there in a minute."

"Just stay there," I call back. "I'm fine."

Then I turn to look for Macy, worried my cousin might be in worse shape than I am. But just as I turn my head to look behind me, another gust of wind hits the tree, hard. It's an eerie sound, and as the trunk starts to sway under the wind's assault, I get more nervous. Especially when another gust comes through and hits me hard enough to threaten my grip on the tree.

Above me, Flint curses again, and Macy yells, "Hold on, Grace! Flint, go get her!"

"Wait!" I shout back to be heard over the wind. "Don't!"

But then Macy screams, and I whirl around, terrified I'm going to see her plunging to her death. And that's when the worst gust of wind yet hits, and I lose my grip on the tree completely.

I scramble to grab on to something—anything—but the wind is too strong. The branch I'm sitting on issues an ominous crack.

And then I'm falling.

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There's Never a Parachute Around When You Need One

or one second, I have perfect clarity—I can hear Macy screaming, Flint calling my name, the wind roaring like a freight train—and then it's all drowned out in the panicked beat of my heart as terror races through me.

I brace myself for bone-crunching impact, but before I hit, Flint is grabbing me, pulling me against him, spinning us in midair. He hits the ground, back first, and I land on him, my face buried in the curve of his neck.

We hit hard enough that the breath is knocked out of me. For one second, two, three, I can't do anything but lay there on top of him, trying desperately to drag a breath into my abused lungs.

Flint's not moving either, and panic is a wild animal inside me as I struggle to get my weight off him. His eyes are closed, and I'm terrified that he's hurt—or worse. He took the brunt of the fall, deliberately spinning us so that he slammed into the hard, snow-packed ground while all I slammed into was him.

It's as I push up into a sitting position, knees on either side of his thighs, that I finally manage to pull in a huge gulp of air. It's also at that moment that all hell breaks loose.

Macy is screaming my name as she scrambles down her tree,

and people swarm us from all directions. I'm too busy shaking Flint and slapping at his cheeks—trying to get him to respond—to pay any attention to what anyone else is doing.

At least until he opens his eyes and drawls, "I'm beginning to think I should have let you fall."

"Oh my God! You're okay!" I scramble off him. "Are you okay?"

"I think so." He sits up with a little groan. "You're heavier than you look."

"You shouldn't move!" I try to shove him back down, but he just laughs.

"The snow broke my fall, Grace. I'm good." To prove it, he jackknifes to his feet in one lithe movement.

It's as he stands up that I realize he's telling the truth. There's a Flint-shaped indention in the snow from where he hit. For the first time since moving to this state, I'm grateful for its ridiculous climate. After all, when you're falling twenty feet, snow is so much softer than ground.

Still, if that's the case... "Why did you jump after me? You could have been hurt."

He doesn't answer, just kind of stands there watching me, a weird look in his eyes. It's not concern or annoyance or pride or any of the other expressions I'd expect him to be wearing right now. Instead, it looks an awful lot like...shame.

But that doesn't make sense. He just saved me from a concussion or a couple of broken bones—at least. What does he have to be ashamed of?

"What was the alternative?" Macy demands, voice shaking like she just got back the power of speech. "Let you be hurt?"

"You mean it's better for Flint to get hurt?" I ask bewildered.

"But he didn't, did he? And neither did you." She turns to him with a grateful look. "Thank you so much, Flint."

Her words make me realize that I've been too busy worrying about—and yelling at—Flint to do what I should have right away. "Thank you. I really appreciate it."

The words sound awkward after all my admonishments, but they are nothing compared to the look on Flint's face as he stares over my shoulder into the crowd. It alternates between looking like he's going to throw a punch and like he's dying to run away.

I figure it's because he's bad with gratitude—I'm terrible with it, so I get that—but as the talking in the crowd dies down and people start parting like a human Red Sea, I turn.

And nearly wither on the spot at the coldness in Jaxon's eyes. Only the fact that it's directed at Flint and not me keeps my knees from giving way completely. Because I only thought he was intimidating at the welcome party.

Right now, the look on his face is absolutely terrifying. And the five inscrutable guys at his back—I assume I'm seeing the whole of the infamous Order for the first time—only reinforce the fact that there's a problem.

A big problem.

I just wish I knew why.

Even Flint, who has never reacted to Jaxon in the past, turns a little sickly looking. And that's before Jaxon, in the coldest, most reasonable voice imaginable, asks him, "What the hell did you think you were doing?"

It's the tone even more than the look that has me moving, a frisson of fear working its way down my spine as I position myself between him and Flint before an all-out brawl can take place. I may not understand all the nuances of what's happening here, but it's obvious that Jaxon is livid-and more than ready to take it out on Flint. Which makes no sense, considering, "I fell, Jaxon. Flint saved me."

For the first time, he turns those cold eyes on me. "Did he?"

"Yes! The wind kicked up, and I lost my balance. I fell out of the tree, and Flint jumped after me." I shoot Flint a stare, telling him to back me up, but he's not looking at me.

He's not looking at Jaxon, either. Instead, he's gazing off into the distance, jaw and fists clenched.

"What's wrong?" I ask, reaching out to touch his shoulder. "Are you hurt after all?"

A fine tremor runs through the earth, a tiny little earthquake that rattles the tree branches a bit but doesn't do anything else. I've heard Alaska has them, so it doesn't surprise me when no one reacts. Even I don't get too excited. In San Diego, we'd have one or two of these tiny ones every couple of months. Flint doesn't even notice. He's too busy shrugging off my hand. "I'm fine, Grace."

"Then what's wrong?" I look back and forth between him and Jaxon. "I don't understand what's happening here."

Neither of them answers me, so I look to Macy for an explanation beyond my working hypothesis that Alaska brings out the worst in people. But she looks as confused as I do—and about a hundred times more terrified.

As for everybody else...they're riveted by the drama, eyes glued to Jaxon as he continues to watch Flint who continues to very obviously not watch him back. It's not the first time I've thought of Jaxon as a hunter, but it is the first time I've thought of Flint as prey. Other members of his group must agree, because in seconds they're moving, guys and girls alike, to flank him on either side.

Their obvious support of Flint only ups the tension between him and Jaxon, whose face has grown even more coldly amused.

I'm trying desperately to figure out how to break things up without bloodshed when Macy suddenly snaps out of whatever stupor she's been in and says, "We should go back to the room, Grace. Make sure you're okay."

"I'm fine," I assure her. Like I'm going to leave Jaxon out here when he looks like he wants to rip Flint's throat out just for breathing. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Actually, that's the best idea I've heard all afternoon." Jaxon takes a step closer until he's right behind me. He doesn't touch me, doesn't even brush against me, but he's close enough that that doesn't matter. I can *feel* him. "I'll walk you back to your room."

The crowd recoils at this. Like, I actually see people drawing back, eyes wide, mouths open, faces slack with shock. I can't figure out what the big deal is unless it's that Jaxon is breaking up the showdown between the two most popular guys in school before it even begins. Not that it's even a real showdown, considering the way Flint's taken himself out of the whole thing by refusing to so much as acknowledge Jaxon's existence.

It's that uncharacteristic behavior more than anything else that has me stepping away from Jaxon and saying, "I need to stay with Flint. Make sure he's really—"

"I'm fine, Grace," Flint grates out from between clenched teeth. "Just go."

"Are you sure?" I reach out a hand to touch his shoulder again, but suddenly Jaxon's there between us, preventing my hand from landing. Then he's stepping forward, moving me slowly, inexorably away from Flint and back toward school.

It's the strangest thing I've ever seen. Definitely the strangest thing I've ever been a part of.

And still, I let it happen. Because this is Jaxon, and I can't seem to help myself.

"Come on, Macy," I say quietly to my cousin and reach for her hand. "Let's go."

She nods, and then we're walking back toward the castle—Macy, Jaxon, and me. I half expect the other members of the

Order to join us, but a quick glance behind me shows that they aren't moving.

No one is.

And can I just say, I'm beginning to feel an awful lot like Alice in Wonderland here—things keep getting "curiouser and curiouser." Maybe that last plane ride with Philip was really a trip down a really big rabbit hole.

We walk in silence for a minute or two, and with each step, I'm beginning to realize that maybe I didn't escape from the fall unscathed after all. Now that the adrenaline has worn off, my right ankle is hurting. A lot.

To keep my mind off the pain—and to keep Jaxon and Macy from noticing that I'm limping—I ask, "What are you doing out here anyway? I thought you weren't going to join the snowball fight."

"Good thing I was out here, considering the mess Flint got you into." Jaxon doesn't so much as glance my way.

"It really is no big deal," I tell him, despite the fact that my ankle is working its way up from painful to excruciating pretty quickly now. "Flint had me. He—"

"Flint very definitely did not have you," he snaps, his voice as hard and brittle as the ice all around us as he turns to face me for the first time. "In fact—" He stops, eyes narrowing. "What's wrong?"

"Besides not being able to figure out why you're so mad?"

He shrugs off the question as he looks me over from head to toe. "What's hurting you?"

"I'm fine."

"You're hurt, Grace?" Macy joins the conversation for the first time. The chicken.

"It's nothing." We've got a head start, but if we stop, the others are sure to catch up with us, and the last thing I need right

now is to make an even bigger spectacle of myself. So much for fitting in...or even *blending* in. After tonight, I might as well be painted biohazard orange. Something I find particularly ironic, since Jaxon is the one who told me to keep my head down.

But seriously. It's just like San Diego all over again. There, I was the girl whose parents died. Here, I'm the girl who fell out of a tree and nearly caused World War III between the two hottest guys in school.

FML.

Determined to make it back to school and my room before the others head this way, I start walking again. Or, should I say, I try to start walking again, because I don't get very far before Jaxon is blocking my path.

"What hurts?" he asks again, and the look on his face tells me he's not going to let it go.

And since arguing with him wastes precious seconds, I finally give in. "My ankle. I must have twisted it when we hit the ground."

Jaxon's kneeling at my feet before I finish, gently probing at my foot and ankle through my boot. "I can't take this off out here or you'll get frostbite. But does it hurt when I do this?"

My gasp is the only answer he needs.

"Should I run ahead and get the snowmobile?" Macy asks. "I can be back before too long."

Oh my God, no. Talk about making a spectacle of myself. "I can walk. Honest. I'm okay."

Jaxon shoots both of us an incredulous look as he helps me to my feet. Then, without a word, he swoops me into his arms.

I Like Standing on My Own Two Feet, but Getting Swept Off Them Feels Surprisingly Good, Too

or long seconds, I can't move. I can't think. I can only stare up at him in a kind of openmouthed shock as my brain short-circuits. Because I'm not actually in Jaxon's arms, right? I mean, I can't be.

Except I am. And they feel really good around me. *Really* good. Plus, being in his arms, bride-style, gives me an up-close-and-personal view of his face. And can I just say how unfair it is that he's even hotter from an inch away? And he smells amazing, too.

His smell—like snow and orange—is what pushes me over the edge, what has me struggling against him like a madwoman in my effort to be put back down. Because if he carries me all the way to school looking and smelling and feeling like he does, I'm going to be a total incoherent mess.

"Can you please stop wiggling around so much?" he demands as I attempt to push myself out of his arms.

"Just let me down, then." I glance at Macy for support, but she's staring at us like she thinks she might be getting punked. Since she's clearly not going to be any help, I turn back to Jaxon. "You can't carry me all the way back to school!" There isn't so much as a hitch in his stride. "Watch me."

"Jaxon, be reasonable. It's a long walk."

"What's your point?"

I squirm around some more, trying to force him to put me down, but that just makes him tighten his hold.

"My point is I'm too heavy."

Again with the incredulous look.

"I'm serious." I put my hands on his chest and use real effort

to push. His arms don't budge from around me. If I'm being honest, I really don't want him to put me down. My ankle is full-on throbbing now, and walking on it is going to be a nightmare. But that doesn't mean I should let him damage himself trying to help me. "Put me down before you hurt yourself."

"Hurt myself?" The eyebrow arch I spent way too much time thinking about last night is back. "Are you *trying* to insult me?"

"I'm trying to get you to let go of me. You can't carry me all the way back to—"

"Grace?" he interrupts.

I wait for him to say something, but when he doesn't, I answer, "What?" in what could, perhaps, be described as not the nicest tone.

"Shut up."

Part of me is super insulted at his words, and the matter-of-fact way he says them, but the part of me that's actually in control of my tongue does exactly what he asks and shuts up. I mean, I suppose there are worse things in the world than being carried by a super-sexy guy instead of struggling along in terrible pain. Maybe.

With me in Jaxon's arms, we move three times as fast as we were when I was limping with every step. Before I know it, we're through the castle doors, striding up the stairs.

When we get to our room, Macy unlocks the door and holds

the weirdass beads back as she tells Jaxon to, "Go on in."

Seconds later, he deposits me on my bed and I think that's going to be the end of it. But then he reaches down and pulls off my boot.

"I can take it from here," I tell him. "Thanks for your help."

He shoots me a look that tells me to shut up again, this time without him ever having uttered the words. Which embarasses me so much that I try to pull my foot away from him and start peeling my sock off on my own.

"I sprained my ankle," I snark. "I'm not dying of consumption."

"Yeah, well, the night is young."

"Hey! What's that supposed to mean?" I glare at him.

"It means you've been here three days, and this is the second time I've had to get you out of trouble."

"Seriously? You're going to hold me responsible for a windstorm now?"

"I am." He wraps his hand around my calf and gently but firmly eases my leg over the edge of the bed so he can look at my ankle. "You didn't see Macy falling out of *her* tree, did you?"

"It wasn't—" Macy starts, but no way am I going to let him get away with blaming me for this.

"Her branch didn't break!" I interrupt. "Mine did. What was I supposed to do? Grab on to the trunk and— Oww!" I try to yank my foot away as he probes at a particularly sore spot.

He ignores me, though his touch—already soft—gets even gentler. "There's no swelling and only a little bruising, so I don't think you broke anything."

"I already told you it was just sprained." I pull my leg away, but with much less force this time. Something about the feel of his hands on my leg, his skin against mine, has me especially unnerved. "You can go now."

This time, the look he gives me is half amused, half don't push

your luck. And, despite that, also super sexy. Which is completely absurd, but that doesn't make it any less true. Heather would die if she saw me now-two small steps away from whimpering and sighing over some ridiculously commanding guy. It's gross, and normally I'd put him in his place. But the fact that he's all growly like this because he's worried about me and wanting to make sure I'm okay? I don't know. Somehow it makes a difference.

"Should I get ice?" Macy asks for the first time since Jaxon overrode her objection. She's currently standing near her bed, all but wringing her hands and trying not to show how freaked out she is that Jaxon is in our room.

I turn to answer—and hopefully reassure her—but realize she's talking to Jaxon. You know, the guy she spent ten minutes warning me about before the snowball fight. "Et tu, Brute?" I say with a roll of my eyes.

She shrugs, a little shamefaced, as Jaxon answers, "That'd be great." Then she all but runs to the door-at least until he smiles his thanks. Then she freezes. Like, actually freezes in the middle of walking, one foot off the floor. "Also," he adds, "do you happen to have an Ace bandage? I can wrap her foot before I go."

She doesn't answer.

"Macy?"

She still doesn't answer.

Jaxon glances at me, both brows raised, but I just roll my eyes. Then clap extra-loud to get her attention.

"Macy?"

"Oh yeah. Ice. I'm on it."

"So no bandage, then?" Jaxon asks.

"And a bandage. Yes. Absolutely. I have a few, actually." Suddenly she's stumbling over her words and her feet as she rushes to her bureau and starts wildly opening drawers.

She finally finds what she's looking for in the bottom drawer

and spins around, a tightly wrapped hot-pink bandage in her hand. "Does this work, Jaxon?"

"It's perfect, thanks."

She glows under his praise, and it's all I can do not to make a teasing comment. But seriously, if she's not careful, she's going to turn into one of his minions. So much for you can tell me how he hurt you. Traitor.

I reach out to take the bandage from her, but Jaxon gets there first. "I really can do it, you know," I tell him.

"Maybe I want to do it for you."

As she heads for the door, Macy makes a sound like the melting is actually starting, and even I have to admit, it's a good line. Then again, convincing myself to like Jaxon has never been hard. I've been attracted to him from the very beginning, even when I was also supremely annoyed by him.

"What? No protests?" he asks a little sardonically.

"Are you going to wrap it or not?" I grouse, ignoring his question because answering it would be too embarrassing.

He ducks his head and gets to work, but not before I see the small grin he's got going on. His scar pulls on the very edges of his lips, but that just turns the smile into a crooked little smirk that is a million times hotter than it should be.

His fingers are cold as he wraps up my ankle, but his hands are so, so gentle. I find myself relaxing despite myself, my muscles going lax as he strokes a finger back and forth against my calf.

And when I say his name this time, even I can hear the yearning. His head snaps up, his dark, bottomless gaze locking with mine.

His hand on my leg becomes firmer, more insistent as he leans in just a little. His wildly sexy scent seems even stronger now than it did when he was carrying me. It fills my senses, makes my mouth water and my hands ache to touch him. Makes me want

to press my face into the curve of his neck and just breathe him in.

I'm already on edge from his closeness, and these new longings he sets off in me have my breath catching in my throat. My heart goes wild and, as he leans in just a little farther, my whole body lights up like the aurora borealis I'm still dying to see.

"Grace." He says my name like it's a promise. It's the last straw, and I gasp, full-on melting commencing deep inside me. I'd say his name back, but I've lost control of my vocal cords. And pretty much the rest of my body, too.

His hand comes up to cup my cheek, and I close my eyes, lean into the caress. And then nearly jump out of my skin as the door crashes open and he yanks his hand back.

"I've got the ice," Macy says. "I even crushed it up and-" She stops cold, her eyes going wide as she senses the tension in the air. With the way Jaxon is leaning over me, it doesn't take a genius to figure out what she interrupted, and for a second, it looks like she's going to ease her way back out of the room.

But then the moment is gone, and Jaxon is standing up, heading toward the door himself. "Put the ice on for twenty minutes and see how it feels. If it isn't better, ice it again in an hour. Got it?"

"Yeah, I've got it," I manage to croak out of my still-tight throat.

"Excellent." He risks giving Macy another smile, then shakes his head as she whimpers just a little. He doesn't say anything else until he's about to walk out of my room. Then he turns around, hand on the doorknob, and says, "Stay away from Flint, Grace. He's not what you think."

The words chase away the last of my vocal paralysis—and goodwill. "Flint and I are friends. And you don't get to tell me what to do." I have just enough self-control not to add, No matter how much you intrigue me.

I expect him to fire back with something—God knows he's arrogant enough to believe he should be instantly obeyed—but instead he just tilts his head and watches me for several long seconds. Then he says, "Okay."

"Okay?" I narrow my eyes at his easy acquiescence. "That's it?"

"That's it." He turns to go.

"I didn't think it would be that easy."

He gives me his inscrutable look, the one I'm already coming to hate. "This is going to be a lot of things, Grace. Easy isn't one of them."

And then he's gone. As usual.

Double damn it.

Baby, It's Hot in Here...

or several seconds after Jaxon leaves, I wait for the other shoe to drop...in this case, a rainbow-colored Converse in the form of Macy demanding to know what's going on between us. Which I can already see is going to be a problem on a lot of levels, most obviously the one where I have no idea about what's going on between us. If anything.

Yes, Jaxon has sought me out twice today, but I have no idea what that means. Or even if it means anything.

And what was that parting shot about, anyway? This is going to be a lot of things, Grace. Easy isn't one of them? Who even says that? Was he saying that he's interested in me? Or that he isn't?

Ugh. Why do guys have to be so complicated?

Maybe he's just playing with me because he's bored or something. Because I'm fresh meat out here in the middle of nowhere. But he didn't look bored after the snowball fight—in fact, he looked pissed as hell at Flint. Which is ridiculous, considering Flint saved me from a concussion or a broken leg or worse.

But a guy who isn't interested doesn't act like Jaxon did, right? He doesn't have the kind of temper tantrum—and it was

a tantrum, despite how cold it was—that Jaxon had in the middle of that forest because he thought Flint had put me at risk.

Does he?

I don't think so...but then, what do I know? I've only ever had one boyfriend, and the way I felt about Gabe was nothing like this. I mean, it was a decent relationship, I guess. We had been friends for years, and it just kind of drifted into something different for a while. We went places together, made out sometimes, did all the usual stuff. But it was easy with Gabe. He never made me feel like Jaxon does, never made my breath catch and my hands sweat and my stomach flip from just a look. I never spent hours obsessing over his every word, never found myself longing for his touch the way I do for Jaxon's.

I just wish I knew how Jaxon felt.

"Oh my God."

Apparently, Macy has finally snapped out of whatever weird Jaxon-induced coma she's been in for the last five minutes. I shoot her a look. "Don't start."

"Oh. My. God. OmigodOmigodOmigod. What just happened?"

"I fell out of a tree. Flint saved me from dying. Jaxon carried me back to the dorm because I sprained my ankle." I say it all very flippantly, hoping if I keep it casual, if I don't let Macy know how messed up my own head is, she'll let things drop.

"Those are just the details." She flops down on my bed, careful not to jostle my ankle as she does.

"I'm pretty sure the details are what's important here."

"Not right now they aren't! Right now, it's all about the big picture."

"And what exactly is the big picture?" I ask.

"That the two most popular boys in school are obsessed with you."

I nearly strangle myself on my sweatshirt as I try to get a look at her face to see if she's kidding or not. "I wouldn't say they're obsessed," I finally manage to get out once I untie my hoodie strings and stop strangling myself in the process. "And aren't you the one who was just warning me to stay as far away from Jaxon as I could get?"

"Yeah, but that was before."

"Before what?" I demand.

"Before I saw how he looks at you." She closes her eyes and makes a sound very close to the one she made when Jaxon smiled at her. "I wish Cam would look at me like that."

"You want your boyfriend to look at you like he's an arrogant prick used to getting his own way?"

"Yeah, he pretty much does that already," she says with a roll of her eyes. "I want him to look at me like it physically *hurts* him not to be touching me."

"Jaxon doesn't look at me like that." I'm beginning to think it's how I look at him, though.

Macy snorts. "Baby, if that boy wanted you any more, he would spontaneously combust."

Her words warm me, make me feel like *I* might spontaneously combust—especially if I spend much longer thinking about Jaxon. That guy is way too hot for his own good...or my own peace of mind. And if Macy's right, if he's thinking even a quarter of the things I'm thinking about him...

"Is it hot in here?" I start to shrug out of the million and three layers of clothing I'm currently wearing.

"After three days of watching you be miserable in the cold, I never thought I'd hear you say that," Macy teases as she grabs hold of my snow pants and starts tugging at them hard enough to pull me halfway down the bed. "Guess all it takes to warm you is getting up close and personal with the most dangerous

boy at Katmere Academy."

I slap at her hands. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to help you. These things are hard to get out of if you can't stand." She yanks and tugs some more and still doesn't get much accomplished.

"It's okay; I can do it." I bat her hands away and stand up so that my weight is balanced on my unhurt leg as I slide off both the snow and fleece pants I'm wearing. Which leaves me in long underwear and wool socks, both of which are a million times more comfortable than the outerwear I'd been sweating in.

Macy strips off her own layers and doesn't say anything else until we're both settled back on my bed again. Then she looks me straight in the eye and says, "You've procrastinated long enough. Now spill."

"There's nothing to spill." I slip under the covers and lean my back up against the wall. "You're the one who said the different cliques never mix."

"Yeah, well, you don't have a *clique* yet, so apparently the rules don't apply to you. And as for having nothing to spill, I call bullshit on that. You've been here exactly seventy-two hours—and I've been with you most of those hours, by the way. Not all of them, obviously, because I had no idea the two hottest boys in school were going to have a massive pissing contest over you in front of half the senior class." She gives me an incredulous look. "When did this happen?"

"Nothing's happened, I swear. Flint and I are just friends—"
"Yeah, right."

"I'm serious. He's really nice, but he's never done anything even remotely un-friend-like."

Macy rolls her eyes. "You mean like carrying you up the staircase or going out of his way to invite you to a snowball fight?"

"You asked him to carry me up the stairs. Altitude sickness, remember?"

"Yeah, and did I also ask him to dive out of a tree to save your life?"

"I'm sure he thought you would have asked if there was time."

"Oh my God! You are so annoying." She flops back against the bed. "I can't decide if you're lying to yourself or if you're just this naive."

"I'm not lying. And I'm not naive." I give her my most sincere look. "I swear, Macy. There's nothing going on between Flint and me."

She studies me for a second, then nods. "Okay, fine. But I notice you didn't say the same thing about you and Jaxon."

"Jaxon and me... Jaxon is... I mean, we're... I don't..." I trail off, cheeks burning, because even I can tell how incoherent and ridiculous I sound. "Ugh."

"Wow." Now Macy's eyes are huge. "That serious, huh?"

I don't know what to say, so I almost don't say anything at all. Except Macy has gone to school here a lot longer than I have, which means she knows a lot more about Jaxon than I do, and I would really like to benefit from a little of that knowledge.

"It's complicated." I expect her to ask what's complicated about it, but she doesn't. Instead she just nods like, of course it is. "He's not really dangerous like you said, is he?"

Even as I ask the question, I know the answer...which is, hell yeah, he is. And you should stay as far away from him as you possibly can.

I mean, he's never been anything but gentle when he touched me, but it's as plain as the scar on his face that Jaxon isn't like the other boys I've known. Every single thing about him screams danger—of the dark and brutally wounded variety. It's in his eyes, in his voice, in the way he holds himself and the way he moves.

I recognize it, even acknowledge it. But when I'm near him, that doesn't matter. When I'm near him, nothing matters but getting closer, even though it's obvious he's been hurt before and just as obvious that he's determined to protect himself. Was it his brother's death that did this to him? Or is Hudson just one

My instincts say it's the latter, but I haven't known him long enough to be sure.

Silence stretches between us for several long seconds. I watch Macy, who pretty much has the opposite of a poker face, as she tries to figure out what to say. It takes a little while, but finally she settles on, "He's not *Silence of the Lambs* dangerous. He's not going to drop you in a pit and starve you so he can make a dress out of your skin or anything."

I burst into incredulous laughter. "Seriously? That's the best you've got? He's not going to make a dress out of my skin?"

She shrugs. "I also said he wouldn't starve you in a pit."

"It's Alaska. You'd need a professional oil drill to make a pit in the frozen ground."

"Exactly." She holds her hands out in an obvious gesture. "See, told you he wouldn't do it."

"Are you trying to be reassuring here, or are you trying to scare the hell out of me?"

"Yes." She bats her eyes at me. "Is it working?"

"I have no freaking idea."

piece of a much bigger puzzle?

My phone buzzes, and I almost ignore it. But it has to be Heather—Macy's the only one at Katmere who's got my number—and right now, I could use a little of my best friend's brand of sanity.

Heather: How was your first day of classes?

Heather: Any hot guys in your English class?

Heather: Or hot girls? Asking for a friend...

She includes the dtf emoji in the last one, and I laugh despite

myself. Then take a quick pic of Macy in her tank top and long underwear, who fakes a pouty pose when I say it's my best friend back home, and answer:

Me: ALL the hot girls.

Heather: Ugh. Mean

Heather: How was class?

Me: Altitude sickness kept me home. But I'm going tomorrow

And then, because Heather can go on forever and I want to finish this conversation about how Jaxon isn't an actual movie serial killer, I text:

Me: Busy right now

Me: ttys

Then I put my phone aside and turn back to my cousin, who is currently scrolling through her own phone. She quits as soon as she realizes I'm done texting and then says, "Tell me the truth, Grace. Do you like Jaxon?"

"Like" is too insipid a word for the emotions Jaxon stirs up in me. There's something about him that calls to me on a souldeep level, something broken in him that somehow fits with what's broken in me.

I know Macy doesn't see it. She's too busy being afraid of his darkness and social status to pay attention to what's under the surface. But I see it—all the grief and pain and fear roiling around in him just beneath the blank face and empty eyes. I see him in a way I don't think anyone else at this school does.

I don't tell her any of that, though—it's not my place to share Jaxon's suffering. Instead, I answer, "What does it matter if I like him or not?"

"That's not an answer."

"Because I don't have an answer!" I groan. "I've been here three days, Mace. Three days! Everything feels upside down and backward, and I have no idea what I think about anything...or

anyone. I mean, how am I supposed to know how I feel about a guy I barely know? Especially when he ignores me one minute and carries me home the next. He's different than anybody I've ever met and—"

Macy's snort interrupts my diatribe.

"What?" I beg. "Why do I get the feeling you know something you're not sharing?"

"I have no idea. Go ahead."

I narrow my eyes at her. "It sounds like you know something."

"Sorry." She holds her hands up in very obvious surrender. "I just...agree. Jaxon is definitely not like anyone you've ever met before."

"You say that like it's such a bad thing. I get that you don't want me to like him—"

"Hey, I told you to stay away from him because he's not an easy guy to be around. Or at least, he never was before. But with you..."

"What?"

"I don't know." She shrugs. "It sounds like every cliché in the book, but he's different when he's with you. He's somehow less intense but also *more* intense, if that makes sense."

"It doesn't. At all."

Macy huffs out a laugh. "I know. But you're the one who asked. I guess what I'm saying is that I'm wary about you and Jaxon doing whatever it is you're doing, but I'm not totally against it. Not like I would have been if I hadn't seen him with you today."

I want to push her on that, want to ask her exactly what she means. But there's a part of me that's sure I already have a pretty good idea. She's talking about the Jaxon I saw in the hall that first day, after Flint carried me up the stairs. Or the Jaxon I saw at the party, the one who looked so cold, so grim, that it sent me running in the opposite direction. Literally. If that's

the only Jaxon she's ever seen, no wonder she felt the need to warn me off him.

"I still don't know what we're doing," I admit, slumping into my pillows. "Or even if we're doing anything. I just wish I knew what he thought about me, you know? Like, is he playing with me, or is he having some of the same thoughts I'm having?"

"What thoughts are you having?" She asks it so casually that I answer without thinking.

"I feel like I am obsessed with him. I think about him all the—" I break off when I realize what I'm saying. "You tricked me."

Her look is all mock innocence. "I just asked you a question. You didn't have to answer it."

"You knew I was preoccupied and wasn't thinking about guarding my words."

"Good. I'm glad you weren't censoring what you say. You don't have to do that with me." She reaches out and grabs my hand. "Seriously, Grace. Things are going to be weird here for you for a while. But we're not going to be weird." She gestures between the two of us. "Even if you can't trust anybody else, you can trust me to have your back—even with Jaxon. We're family."

Suddenly, there's a lump the size of Denali in my throat, and I swallow a couple of times, trying to clear it. I didn't know how badly I needed to hear those words until she said them, didn't realize how much I was missing having someone I can just count on—no questions asked—to be in my corner.

"You know that goes both ways, right, Macy? You can trust me, too."

She grins. "I already do. I just want to make sure you remember what I said. And that I'm here, no matter what, on your side."

There's something intense in the way she says it—and the

way she looks at me afterward. Like she's trying to warn me and reassure me at the same time. It's so bizarre that a frisson of unease runs down my spine, taking away the toasty warmth that comes with lying under my blanket and replacing it with a chill that has nothing to do with Alaska and everything to do with the feeling that I'm in way over my head here, even if I don't know it yet.

I try to ignore the feeling, tell myself I'm probably just being paranoid. I'm smart—and honest—enough to acknowledge that lately I tend to expect the worst in every situation.

But instead of dwelling on the discomfort, I just nod and say, "Good. I'm glad."

Macy grins. "Now that we've got that out of the way, there is

something I want to talk to you about." She gets up, crosses to her mini fridge. "But I'm pretty sure you're not going to like it."

23

Never Bring an Ice Cream Scoop to a Gun Fight

eye Macy warily as she opens up the fridge and rummages around. "Exactly how much am I not going to like it?"

She holds up a pint of Cherry Garcia with a triumphant sound.

My stomach drops. "It's so bad that we need Ben and Jerry's?"

"To be honest, I always need Ben and Jerry's." She pulls the top off the brightly colored container, then grabs two spoons out of the bright-purple utensil cup on top of the fridge. "This just seems like a good time to indulge."

I take the spoon she holds out to me. "I didn't even know they sold Ben and Jerry's up here."

"It's ten bucks a pint at the closest store, but they sell it." She smiles at my look of horror.

"Wow. That's..."

She grins. "Welcome to Alaska."

"Guess what you have to talk about really is serious if it needs ten-dollar ice cream."

She doesn't say anything to my blatant fishing attempt, just holds out the open container so I can take a spoon of it. Which I do. She does, as well, and we do an ice-cream toast—mostly

because toasting with the first bite of ice cream is a ritual we created the summer we spent together when we were five—before taking a bite.

I wait for Macy to tell me whatever's on her mind, but she just scoops up another spoonful of ice cream. Then a third and a fourth, until I give up and do the same.

We're about halfway done with the container before she finally says, "I need to warn you about something."

Okaaaaaay? "Haven't you already warned me about Jaxon? I thought that's what we just did."

"This isn't about him. Or, I mean, I guess it is, but not like you're thinking." I must look as confused as I feel, because she takes a deep breath and blurts out, "If you like Jaxon—and I'm cool with it if you do, honest. But if you like him, Grace, you can't keep hanging out with Flint, too. It won't work."

That's so far from where I expected her to go that it takes me a second to actually assimilate her words. And even after I decide I understand them, they still don't make any sense. "What do you mean, it won't work? I'm not actually dating either one of them right now, and even if I was...surely I can be friends with the other one?"

"No." She shakes her head emphatically. "You can't. That's what I'm trying to tell you."

I'm half convinced she's messing with me—because how could she not be?—but she looks so serious, I have to ask, "What do you mean I can't? What is this? The Breakfast Club?"

"Worse. Way worse."

"Obviously, because even in *The Breakfast Club*, they figured out it didn't matter what group you belong to."

"Isn't *The Breakfast Club* also the movie where Judd Nelson sexually harasses Molly Ringwald by reaching up her skirt when he's hiding under her desk?"

When she puts it that way... "Okay, so maybe it's not the best example."

She rolls her eyes. "You think?"

"Even so, this whole Jaxon and Flint can't be civil to each other because they head up different groups argument you're making is ridiculous. Do you know how many people have been nice to me since I got here?" I hold up four fingers and tick off the names as I say them. "You, Jaxon, Flint, and Lia. That's it. Four people. Which is why telling me that I can't talk to one of the four people in this entire place who doesn't treat me like I have the plague is total bullshit."

"Oh, Grace." She looks heartbroken. "Has it really been that bad?"

"Well, it hasn't exactly been a picnic—even without the near-death experiences." Still, she looks so distraught at my words that I can't help but walk them back a little. "Don't worry about it, Mace. I haven't even started classes yet. I'm sure people will loosen up and stop staring once they have a chance to get to know me."

She jumps on the walk-back. "They will, Grace. I swear. They just need to spend some time with you. We don't get a lot of new people here, and most of us have been together a long time, even before Katmere."

"I didn't realize that."

"Yeah. There's another school that most of us went to before this one, starting in fifth grade. So if we seem aloof, that's part of it, you know?"

"Yeah, but shouldn't knowing one another that long make it easier for all of you to get along and not harder?"

"It should. And for a while, even, it did. I don't know how to explain why things went bad, except to say that some awful stuff happened about a year ago and things got completely out of hand. I mean, on the surface it looks like everything's fine, but once you dig a little, the damage is all right there. And part of what happened makes it nearly impossible for Jaxon and Flint to be on the same side of...anything."

It's pretty much the vaguest explanation anyone has ever given me about anything. And still it has me thinking, trying to piece together the very few things I've learned since I've been here. "Is this about what happened to Hudson Vega?"

The question is out before I can think twice about it, and judging from the look on Macy's face, I definitely should have thought twice. "What do you know about Hudson?" she whispers so quietly that it feels like she's scared to say his name out loud.

"Lia told me that her boyfriend died, remember? But then Jaxon mentioned his brother, and I put two and two together after I saw them arguing."

"Did Jaxon tell you Hudson was dead?" I don't think she would look this shocked if I told her I was flying back to San Diego under my own power, and suddenly all kinds of doubts assail me.

"Isn't he?" If Jaxon was lying to me about something like that, I don't know what I'll do. I mean, what kind of person-?

"He is. Yes. It's just that he doesn't talk about it much. The whole thing almost destroyed him, and I just couldn't imagine him discussing it with..." She trails off.

"A total stranger?"

"Yeah." She looks a little guilty to be admitting it. "Not that you guys are strangers, I guess-"

"Sometimes it's easier," I interrupt. "Talking to your best friend about the worst thing that ever happened to you is excruciating. Talking to a stranger who doesn't have any kind of vested interest...sometimes it doesn't hurt so much." It sounds weird, but it's true. Just one of the things I've learned in the last

"That makes a strange kind of sense." She puts the ice cream down and leans over to hug me. I hug her back for a few seconds—until I feel the tears that

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are never far from the surface start to well up in my eyes. Then I pull back and give her a grin that says I'm totally fine, even if I'm not. "Maybe that's why it seems like Jaxon is different with me. Because he knows I've lost someone, too." "Maybe." She looks doubtful. "But if the attraction between

you and Jaxon is because you've both lost someone... Just be careful, okay, Grace? The last thing you want is to become the chew toy in a game of tug-of-war between him and Flint. Because in the end, you're going to be the one who gets ripped apart."

I try to ignore her words—and do a pretty good job of it for the rest of the night. But once I'm in bed, with the lights out, I can't help but think about what Macy said...and how it feels more like a premonition than a warning.

A heaviness creeps into my bones at the thought, pushing me into the bed, weighing me down until the simple act of rolling over and curling into a protective ball feels impossible. I settle for wrapping my arms around my waist and telling myself that she's wrong. Even as a little voice inside me warns that she's not. I wake up slowly to the sound of a text coming in. I groan as I think about ignoring it, about staying wrapped up in my covers where it's warm and comfortable and *perfect*. But I've been slow in responding to Heather's texts since I got to Alaska, and that's not cool.

Except when I roll over and grab my phone, I realize two things. One, it's after ten in the morning, which means I slept right through first period. And two, the text isn't from Heather.

And it's not from Macy, either. Instead, it's from a number I don't recognize.

Unknown: How is your ankle?

Flint? I wonder as I brush my hair out of my eyes and sit up. Or someone else?

For a moment, Jaxon's eyes—deep, dark, fathomless—come to mind, but I can't believe it's him. Not when he's been so hot and cold the entire time we've known each other. And definitely not when he told me last night that we were going to do things the hard way—whatever that means.

Deciding to play it safe, I text back:

Me: Who is this?

There's a long pause. Then:

Unknown: Jaxon

It's only one word, and yet it somehow all but crackles with indignation. Like he can't imagine that I don't already have his number in my phone, just waiting for him to finally get around to texting me. I should be annoyed at the assumption, but I'm amused instead. So amused that I can't help answering:

Me: Jaxon who?

Jaxon: I don't know the punch line

Me: To what?

Jaxon: Whatever knock-knock joke you're setting up

I burst out laughing, because he's funny over text in a way he hasn't shown me in person.

Me: I'm terrible at knock-knock jokes

Jaxon: Finally some good news

Me: Hey!

Me: How many tickles does it take to make an octopus laugh?

There's a long pause, where I can totally imagine his face.

Then:

Jaxon: I didn't realize octopi laughed

Yeah, that's pretty much the response I expected. I send an eye roll emoji, then:

Me: Come on. Play along.

Jaxon: I just wanted to know how your ankle was

Me: Take a guess and I'll tell you

Another long pause.

Jaxon: 17

Me: 17?!?!?!?!?!

Jaxon: Well, it's obviously not 8 or it wouldn't be a joke

Jaxon: And I don't have a clue otherwise, so why not 17?

I send him two more eye roll emojis.

Me: Let's try this again

Me: How many tickles does it take to make an octopus laugh?

This pause is so long that I've just about convinced myself that I've blown it and he isn't going to answer. But then:

Jaxon: How many?

I nearly drop my phone in excitement, and I'm grinning so hard that my cheeks hurt. Which is ridiculous, but I'm learning that when it comes to this boy, *I'm* ridiculous.

Me: Ten-tickles

Jaxon: That's...actually pretty good

Me: Wow. High praise

Jaxon: Don't let it go to your head

Me: Believe me, I won't

Me: Triple eye roll emoji

Jaxon: What do you get when you cross a vampire and a snowman?

What? A joke? From the perennially serious Jaxon Vega? I can't answer back fast enough.

Me: I have no idea.

Jaxon: Frostbite

I laugh out loud, because who is this Jaxon? And how do I keep him around?

Me: Halloween and Alaska all rolled into one, huh?

Me: Color me impressed

There's another long pause, but this time something tells me not to give up on Jaxon quite yet. That he isn't not texting because he's put down his phone but because he's trying to figure out what to say next. Which...can you say mind-boggling? I can barely imagine a Jaxon who doesn't know exactly what to do and say in any situation.

Finally my phone dings again.

It's not a great segue from the fun conversation we were just having, but I go with it, because the alternative is not answering, and I don't want to do that. At least not yet.

Me: I don't know. I'm just waking up. My uncle must have decided I don't have to go to class again today.

Jaxon: I'd say lucky you, but...

Me: What, falling out of a tree not lucky enough for you? **Jaxon:** Do you KNOW what lucky means?

The laugh hits me so unexpectedly that I nearly snort. Then

slap a hand over my mouth in horrified amusement, even though there's no one around to hear.

Me: I walked away, didn't I?

Jaxon: eye roll emoji

Jaxon: Pretty sure I carried you away **Me:** Oh. Right. Thanks again for that.

Jaxon: All the eye roll emojis

Now that he's got me thinking about it, I'm curious how my ankle is, too. So I throw back the covers and try to climb out of bed—only to whimper the second I put any weight on my right foot. Well, that answers that. With the added problem that I

Jaxon: What are you going to do today?

Me: I think I'll lie in bed and feel sorry for myself

Jaxon: Good times

Me: Yeah, well, turns out the ankle hurts a little bit

Jaxon: You ok?

Me: Of course

Me: brb

really have to pee.

we: pr

I use the promise of Advil to propel myself across the room to the bathroom. When I'm done, I wash my hands and grab two of the little round pills and a bottle of water before hobbling

back to my bed. I force myself to take the pills before I pick my phone back up again, but it's hard. I'm dying to know if Jaxon texted me back.

He didn't. Which is cool, I tell myself. I mean. I'm the one who cut our conversation off so abruptly.

Me: I'm back No answer.

Me: Sorry that took so long.

Still no answer.

Ugh. I blew it.

I'm pissed at myself for stopping our conversation. And just as angry for being pissed off. Jaxon showed me more of himself in the last fifteen minutes than he has since I got here. What do I have to be annoyed about that he stopped texting?

Absolutely nothing. I mean, the boy does have to go to class, after all.

Somehow, telling myself that only makes everything worse. Well, that and the fact that I'm starving, and the peanut butter is all the way across the room. Of course.

I lie back against my pillows and fire off a couple of messages to Heather. Then I check Snapchat and Instagram and even play a couple of rounds of *Pac-Man*—all while telling myself that I'm absolutely, positively not waiting for Jaxon to text again.

But eventually my stomach starts growling, and I toss my phone aside. A girl can't live on peanut butter alone, even if right now I'm hungry enough to give it a try.

I start to hobble toward the fridge but get distracted halfway there by a knock on my door. For a second, just a second, I wonder if it might be Jaxon. Then common sense kicks in. It's probably Uncle Finn coming to check on me and my bum ankle.

Except when I answer the door, it's not Uncle Finn. And it's not Jaxon, either. Instead, it's a woman carrying a heavily

loaded food tray.

"Grace?" she asks as I step aside to let her in.

"Yes." I smile at her. "Thank you so much. I'm starving."

"Anytime." She grins back. "Where do you want me to put it?"

"I can take it." I reach for the tray, but she shoots me a look that says to give her a break. "Um, the bed is fine, I guess." I gesture toward my side of the room.

She crosses to my bed and puts the tray down toward the foot of it. Then asks, "Is there anything else I can get you?"

I have no idea, considering the food is under two of those silver dome things to keep it warm. But since I'm hungry enough to eat almost anything—and I'm not in the habit of having anyone wait on me—I answer, "No, this is perfect. Thank you."

Trust Macy to think of me even when she's in class. My cousin is a goddess.

Except, as I settle back onto the bed, I realize there's a small black envelope on the tray. One that has my name written on the front in a masculine scrawl that definitely isn't Macy's.

Uncle Finn, I tell myself, even as my heart beats triple time.

Because it can't be Jaxon, I figure as I reach for the envelope with trembling fingers.

Can't be Jaxon, I think again as I slide out the simple black card.

Definitely can't be Jaxon, I tell myself one more time as I open up the card and search for a signature.

Except...except it *is* from Jaxon, and my heart is actually threatening to burst out of my chest.

I don't know what you like yet, but I figured you were hungry. Stay off that ankle. Jaxon Oh my God.

Omigod Omigod Omigod.

Oh. My. God.

I mean, it's not the *most* romantic note in the world, but that doesn't even matter. Because Jaxon sent me breakfast. *That's* why he didn't text me back. He was busy doing this.

I grab my phone and fire off a quick text to him.

Me: Thank you!!!!!!!!!! You really are a lifesaver

He doesn't answer right away, so I start poking around the tray, seeing what he had the cafeteria bring me. The answer is *everything*.

There's a cup of coffee and another one of tea. A bottle of sparkling water and a glass of orange juice. There's even an ice pack for my ankle.

I lift up the domes to find one plate loaded with eggs and sausage and a giant cinnamon roll that smells amazing. The other has a Belgian waffle on it, topped with strawberry compote and what looks to be freshly whipped cream...in the middle of Alaska. In *November*.

I'm so touched, I think I might cry. Or I would if I wasn't so hungry.

Still, there's no way I can eat all this, and I should feel bad about wasting the food. But right now, I'm too busy smiling to worry about anything else.

My stomach growls again, louder this time, and I dig in, starting with the waffle. Because whipped cream plus syrup plus strawberries equals nirvana.

I'm halfway through the whipped cream covered deliciousness when my phone finally dings again—and I nearly upend the whole tray trying to get to it.

Jaxon: Sorry, taking a test

Jaxon: Waffles or eggs?

Me: Waffles all the way

Jaxon: I figured

Jaxon: Use the ice pack Me: Wow. Bossy much?

Me. I om using it I con

Me: I am using it. I can take care of myself, you know

Jaxon: Now who's being bossy?

I'm not sure if I should be offended or not by that latest crack. I probably should be, but a waffle this good gives the guy a little extra leeway. Plus, I maybe, possibly deserved it.

Me: How about you? Waffles or eggs?

Jaxon: Neither

Me: So what do you like to eat?

As soon as I hit Send, I realize what a bad idea that last text was and start freaking out. Because oh my God, that sounded way more suggestive than I meant it to be. Damn it. He's either going to think I'm a freak or he's going to respond with something really gross, and I don't want either of those things to happen.

It's been a long time since I've texted/flirted with a boy, and I'm not ready for it to end.

I'm certainly not ready to stop talking to Jaxon, who's witty and sexy and makes me feel things no one else ever has. Plus, it's so much easier to talk to him like this than in person, when he's all dark and broody.

Several seconds pass without a response, and I contemplate throwing my phone across the room or drowning myself in the leftover maple syrup.

In the end, I do neither. I just wait impatiently for him to answer. And when he finally does, I hold my breath as I swipe open my screen. Then burst out laughing because:

Jaxon: I don't think we're there yet, but I'm sure you'll let me know when we are

Way. Right. Answer.

I spend the rest of the morning lying around, waiting for Jaxon to text whenever he can. Which is so not a badass feminist move, but I've given up controlling my brain when it comes to this boy. Plus, it's not like there's anything else to do. I've read everything on my Kindle, and I can't watch any more episodes of *Legacies* without Macy. Add in my bum ankle and the fact that I can't go anywhere and that leaves...

Jaxon: What's your favorite movie?

Me: Atm? To All The Boys I've Loved Before **Me:** Of all time? Some Kind of Wonderful

Me: Yours

Jaxon: Die Hard Me: Seriously?

Jaxon: What's wrong with Die Hard?

Me: Nothing

Jaxon: Jk. It's Rogue One

Me: The Star Wars movie where everybody dies????

Jaxon: The Star Wars movie where people sacrifice

themselves to save their galaxy

Jaxon: There are worse ways to die

Hard makes sense when I put it in that light. A main character

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who's willing to die if it means keeping other people safe.

There's a lot more to Jaxon than the person I met at the bottom of the stairs my first day here. I mean, he's still the jerk who told me not to let the door hit me on my way out. That's not something I'm likely to forget any time soon. But he's also the guy who saved me from Marc and Quinn. And the guy who carried me all the way back to my dorm room last night. That has to count for something, right?

Plus, I can't believe how different he is when there's no one else around. When it's just the two of us texting and he's not so busy trying to convince me that he wants nothing to do with me... and, more, that I should want nothing to do with him.

I wish I could ask the real Jaxon Vega to please stand up, but the truth is, I'm kind of hoping he's the guy who's been texting me for the last two hours. And if he's not...well, I guess I don't want to know that yet.

Me: Favorite ice cream flavor?

Jaxon: Don't have one

Me: Because you like them all???

Me: Which, btw, is the only acceptable answer to not having a favorite

Jaxon: I think we both know there are a million different reasons I'm unacceptable and ice cream choice barely makes the list

That line shouldn't make me swoon. It shouldn't, especially when it's so obviously a warning. But how can it not when it's delivered by the same boy who said Rogue One is his favorite movie?

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wish I knew why.

Jaxon: Favorite song?

Me: OMG, I can't choose

Jaxon: What if I said you had to?

Me: I can't. There are too many

Me: You?

Jaxon: I asked you first Me: Ugh. You suck

we: Ugn. You suci

Jaxon: You have no idea how much

Me: Okay, fine

Me: Atm, Niall Horan's Put a Little Love on Me and anything by Maggie Rogers

Me: Of all time? Take Me to Church by Hozier or Umbrella from Rihanna

Me: You?

Jaxon: Savage Garden Truly, Madly, Deeply

Jaxon: Anything by Childish Gambino or Beethoven

Jaxon: Van Morrison's "Brown-Eyed Girl" is my new favorite, though

I drop my phone because...what do I say to that? How am I not supposed to swoon over this boy? Like, seriously? *How am I not supposed to swoon?* It's impossible.

I pick my phone back up with shaking hands. He hasn't texted anything else, but to be honest, I don't expect him to for a while. That was...a lot.

Instead, I swipe open my Spotify app. And play "Brown-Eyed Girl"...on repeat.

I'm still listening to it when Macy stops by around noon to check on me. "What are you listening to?" she queries, nose wrinkled.

"It's a long story."

She eyes me speculatively. "I bet. You should tell me all about—" She breaks off when she sees the remains of my very big breakfast. "Where did you get the waffle?" she demands, crossing the room so she can scoop a little of the leftover whipped cream out of its bowl and suck it off her finger. "It's not Thursday."

I stare at her, baffled. "I don't even know what that means."

"It means the cafeteria only makes waffles on Thursdays. And we only get whipped cream on special occasions." She dives back into the whipped-cream bowl, holds up a finger covered in the sweet, fluffy stuff. "Today is *not* a special occasion."

"Apparently, it is," I answer with a shrug, and I try to ignore the way her words warm me up all over. "At least for me."

Not going to lie, it *feels* like a special occasion. How can it not when I have texts on my phone from Jaxon right now telling me this is his favorite song?

"I can't believe my dad had them make you—" My face must give it away, because she breaks off mid-sentence. "This breakfast didn't come from my dad, did it?"

I don't know how to answer that. I mean, if I try to pretend it's from Uncle Finn, she'll just ask him about it and find out the truth. If I tell her it's from someone else, she's going to want to know who sent it, and I'm not sure I'm ready to tell her. I kind of like the idea of this Jaxon—the one who tells me vampire jokes and sends me waffles with fresh whipped cream—as my secret. At least for a little while.

But the look on Macy's face says she's not about to be put off. And that she's got a pretty good idea of where the food came from, even though I haven't answered her yet.

Which leaves me with only one option, really. A downplayed version of the truth. "It's really no big deal, okay? My ankle's bothering me, and he was trying to help."

"Flint?" she asks, eyes wide. "Or Jaxon?" She says the last

in a whisper.

"Does it matter?" I ask.

"Oh my God! It was Jaxon! He talked Chef Janie into making you waffles. I didn't even know that was possible—she's really tough. Then again, if anyone could do it, Jaxon could. I mean, the boy is terrifyingly efficient. And he always gets what he wants." She grins. "And I'm pretty sure what he wants right now is you."

A knock sounds from behind her, and I've never been more relieved to have someone come to my door in my life. "Can you get that? My ankle still hurts."

"Of course! I want first crack at interrogating Jaxon anyway."

"It's not going to be Jaxon," I tell her, but just the idea that it could be has my palms sweating a little. I sit up straighter, try desperately to fix the mess that is currently my hair as Macy opens the door.

Looks like the panic was for nothing, though, because it isn't Jaxon. It's a woman, carrying a large yellow envelope.

I tell myself I'm not disappointed, even as the sudden butterflies in my stomach kind of fall back down with a *thud*. At least until the woman, who Macy calls Roni, hands her the package. "I'm supposed to deliver this to Grace."

Macy whips her head around to look at me even as she takes the large envelope being thrust into her hands. Her eyes are huge, but I can't blame her. I'm sure mine are just as big.

I don't know what else Macy says to Roni to get her out of our room, because every ounce of my attention is focused on the envelope in her hands. And my name written on the front of it in the same bold scrawl that was on the earlier note.

"Give me!" I practically beg as I push myself to my feet. My ankle still hurts, but for this, I'm willing to suffer.

Except Macy is in full mother-hen mode, apparently. "Sit back down!" she squawks as she shoos me back to bed.

"Give me the envelope!" I make grabby hands at it.

"I'll give it to you as soon as you're back in bed with your ankle on that pillow."

And then she glares at me, standing just out of reach, until I do what she says.

But the second I'm settled, the stern look goes away and the stars come back to her eyes. She thrusts the envelope at me and practically yells, "Open it, open it, open it!"

"That's what I'm doing!" I tell her as I tear at the seal. It's one of those plastic Bubble Wrap ones, so it's harder than it should be, but eventually I get it open.

And out falls a large black library book.

"What is it?" Macy climbs on the bed next to me in an effort to get a better look.

"I don't know," I answer. But then I turn it over and...it's totally the last book I ever would have expected him to send.

"Twilight? He sent me a copy of Twilight?" I turn to Macy in confusion.

Macy gasps as she stares from the book to me. And then she starts to laugh. And laugh. And laugh.

And I guess it's kind of funny...the idea that a guy like Jaxon would send a girl a paranormal romance, but I don't think it's nearly as amusing as Macy is making it out to be. Plus, I've always kind of wanted to read it, to see what all the fuss was about all those years ago.

"I like it," I tell her a little defiantly. Because I do—almost as much as I like the fact that Jaxon took the time to pick it out for me.

"I do, too," Macy says around another fit of giggles. "I swear. It's super...charming, actually."

"I agree." I open the front cover, and my heart stutters as I see the small Post-it note stuck to the cover page. In the scrawl

I'm rapidly coming to recognize as Jaxon's is this quote from the novel: "I said it would be better if we weren't friends. not that I didn't unnt to be."

"Oooooooh!" Macy clutches her hands to her chest and pretends to swoon. "If you don't kiss that boy soon, I'm going to disown you. Or I'm going to kiss him myself."

"I'm sure Cam would appreciate that." I trace my finger over the individual letters of every word he wrote, one after the other, even knowing it makes me look as starry-eyed as I feel.

"Hey, Cam's always talking about doing things for the greater good. Here's his chance to put his money where his mouth is."

"You kissing Jaxon is for the greater good?" I open the book to the first page.

"Me kissing Jaxon as your proxy is definitely for the greater good. Put you both out of your misery." She bats her eyelashes. "Though it definitely wouldn't be a sacrifice."

"How about we make a pact? You keep your lips off Jaxon and I'll keep mine off Cam?"

"Wooo!" Macy shouts so loud, it makes me jump. "I knew last night you were into him, with your babbling and your I-we-he stuff."

"I didn't say I was into him." But it's kind of hard not to fall for him at least a little after a morning like this one.

"You didn't say you weren't, either."

I roll my eyes. "Don't you have a class to go to?"

"Trying to get rid of me?" But she climbs off my bed, starts straightening her hair in the mirror over the dresser.

"I am, yes." I hold up the book. "I want to start reading."

"I bet you do." She makes kissy faces at me. "Oh, Edward, I love you so much! Whoops, I mean Jaxon."

I throw a pillow at her, but she just laughs and grabs her

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the door.

The second Macy's gone, I sink back onto the bed and hold *Twilight* to my chest. Jaxon sent me a love story. I mean, yeah, it's about a vampire, but it's still a love story. And that quote... I didn't want to show it in front of my cousin, but swooooooooon.

I grab my phone and fire off a text to Jaxon.

Me: Swoon emoji

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Jaxon: Don't get too starry-eyed

Jaxon: It's supposed to be a warning Jaxon: Winky kiss emoji

Me: Of what?

wie: Of what?

Jaxon: Things that go bump in the night

Jaxon: You never can be too careful Me: I like scary stories

Jaxon: But do you like the monsters in them?

Me: I guess it depends on the monster

Jaxon: I guess we'll see, then, won't we?

Me: I don't know what that means

I start to text more—his mood is so different than it was earlier, and I want to get to the bottom of the change—but there's yet another knock on my door.

Me: Hey, did you send me something else????????

Jaxon: Why don't you open the door and find out?

Me: That sounds like a yes

Me: You don't have to do this, you know

Me: I mean, I appreciate it so much

Me: But it's not necessary

Jaxon: Grace

Jaxon: Open the door

I start making my way across the room to the door, thrilled that since the Advil kicked in, walking doesn't hurt as much, and my limp is a lot less pronounced. Then, right before I open the door, I text:

Me: How do you know I haven't already opened the door?

"Because I think I would have noticed," he answers from where he's standing on the other side of the beaded curtain.

"Jaxon!" I squeak out his name, my free hand going to my hair automatically in an effort to smooth down the mess. "You're here."

He lifts a brow. "You want me to go?"

"No, of course not! Come on in." I hold the door open as I step back.

"Thanks." He jerks a little as he steps over the threshold and Macy's beads brush against him.

"I don't know why Macy insists on keeping those up when they shock people on the regular," I say, swatting the annoying things out of the way so I can close the door. "Are you okay?"

"I have no idea." His eyes meet mine for the first time, and the happiness bubbling inside me dies down as I realize the blankness is back.

"Oh, well." I duck my head, suddenly way self-conscious around this guy who I've had no trouble talking to all day. "Thanks for the book."

He shakes his head, but at least he's smiling when he answers. "I thought it might give you something to do while you're resting your ankle." He looks at me pointedly.

"Hey, I was in bed. You're the one who knocked on my door."

His eyes widen a little at my mention of being in bed, and then we both do the only thing we can do in the situation—stare awkwardly at my rumpled hot-pink sheets and comforter.

"Do you, um—" I clear my suddenly clogged throat. "Do you want to sit down?"

He makes a face, then moves in a negative motion but

seconds later does the opposite and plops down at the end of my bed. All the way in the corner, like he's afraid I'm going to bite him—or jump him.

It's such an un-Jaxon-like move that for a second, I just kind of stare at him. And then decide, screw it. I'm not going to spend the next hour feeling awkward. I'm just not. So I flop down on the bed next to him and ask, "What did one bone say to the other bone?"

He eyes me warily, but his shoulders relax—and so does the rest of him. "I don't think I want to know."

I ignore him. "We have to stop meeting at this joint."

He groans. "That was..."

"Fabulous?" I tease.

He shakes his head. "Really, really awful." But he's smirking, and finally I can see something in the depths of his eyes—something real, instead of that terrible blankness.

Determined to keep it that way, I tell him, "It's kind of a specialty of mine."

"Bad jokes?"

"Terrible jokes. I inherited the talent from my mother."

He lifts a brow. "So terrible jokes run in the DNA?"

"Oh, it's totally a gene," I agree. "Right next to the ones for curly hair and long eyelashes." I bat my eyes at him to make a point, much the way Macy did to me a little while ago.

"Are you sure you didn't get it from both sides?" he asks, face totally innocent.

I narrow my eyes at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing." He holds his hands up in mock surrender. "Just that your jokes are *really* terrible."

"Hey! You said you liked my octopus joke."

"I didn't want to hurt your feelings." He reaches for my leg, drapes my foot and ankle over his lap. "It seemed rude to kick you when you were down and out."

"Hey! I may be down, but I'm not out." I try to pull my foot back, but Jaxon holds me in place, his long, elegant fingers instinctively finding the spots that hurt the most and massaging them.

I moan a little because the massage feels *really* good. And so does having his hands on me. "How are you so good at that?" I ask when I can finally speak again.

He shrugs, shoots me a little smirk. "Maybe I inherited it."

It's the first time he's mentioned any family except his one cryptic comment about his brother yesterday, and I jump on it. "Did you?"

He stops for a second—his hand, his breath, everything—and just looks at me with those eyes I try so hard to find emotion in. And then he says, "No."

His fingers start back on their massage like they never even stopped.

It frustrates me, but not enough to push when he has No Trespassing signs posted all over himself in huge black letters. Which says a lot more about him than he could possibly imagine.

We spend the next couple of minutes in silence as he massages my foot until the ache is almost completely gone. Only then, when his fingers finally still for good, does he say, "My eyes."

My gaze darts to his. "What do you mean?"

"That's what I got from my mother. My eyes."

"Oh." I lean forward until I can once again see the silver flecks against the darkness of his irises. "They're beautiful eyes." Especially when he's looking at me the way he is now—a little bemused, a little intrigued, a lot surprised. "Did you inherit anything else from your mother?" I ask softly.

"I hope not." His words are low, unguarded, and it's the first time he's ever been so open with me. e 1:22-cv-02435-LLS-SN Document 276-31 Filed 11/22/23 Page 214 of

it's too late. The second he registers what he said, Jaxon's entire face closes up.

"I need to go," he tells me, setting my foot gently on the bed

before getting to his feet.

"Please don't." It's barely more than a whisper, but the sentiment comes from deep inside me. I feel like I'm seeing the real Jaxon for the first time up close and personal, and I don't want to lose that.

He pauses, and for a moment, I think he might actually listen to me. But then he's reaching inside the pocket of his designer jacket and pulling out a rolled-up piece of paper that's been fastened with a black satin ribbon.

He holds it out to me.

I take it with hands that I have to will to stay steady. "You didn't have to—"

"It made me think of you." He reaches up, takes a gentle hold of one of my curls, as has become his habit. But this time, he doesn't stretch it out and let it boing back into place. Instead, he simply worries it between his fingers.

Our eyes meet, and suddenly the room feels about twenty degrees hotter. My breath catches in my throat, and I bite my lower lip in an effort to keep myself from saying—or doing—something we're not ready for.

Except Jaxon looks like he might be ready for all kinds of things, with his gaze fastened on my mouth and his body swaying toward me just a little.

And then he's reaching out, pressing his thumb against my lip until I get the hint and stop biting it.

"Jaxon." I reach for him, but he's already across the room, his hand on the doorknob.

"Rest that ankle," he tells me as he opens the door. "If it feels

better tomorrow, I'll take you to my favorite place."

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"Which is?"

He quirks a brow, tilts his head. And doesn't say another

word as he slips into the hall and closes the door behind him.

I stare after him, the scrolled-up piece of paper he gave me

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still in my hand. And wonder how on earth I'm going to keep this beautiful, broken boy from cracking my already battered heart wide open.

26

The Uniform Doesn't Make the Woman, But it Sure Does Bring Out the Insecurities

I stare at my closet and all the clothes neatly lined up in it, courtesy of my cousin. I know I should have done this last night, but after a giant plate of nachos followed by three episodes of *Legacies* and a marathon gossip session over my jam-packed day, I didn't have the energy to do much more than lie in bed and think about Jaxon.

I turn toward my desk—and the paper Jaxon brought me yesterday, which is lying directly under the copy of *Twilight* he sent me. Not because I don't like it but because I like it too much, and I don't want to share it with anyone. Not even Macy or Heather.

It's a page ripped straight out of a copy of Anaïs Nin's journals—I don't know which one, because the heading doesn't say. I almost googled it yesterday to find out, but there's something special about not knowing, something intimate about having only this one page of her diary to go by. To have only these words that Jaxon wanted me to see.

Deep down, I am not different from you. I dreamed you, I wished for your existence.

The page has a lot more than that simple phrase on it, but as I read and reread it about a hundred times yesterday, these are the words that jumped out at me over and over again. Partly because they were so swoon-worthy and partly because I'm starting to feel the same way about him. About Jaxon, whose deepest thoughts and heart and pain seem to so closely echo mine.

It's a lot to take in at any time, let alone on my first day, when my mouth is dry and my stomach is churning with nerves.

Which is why I'm currently standing here, in front of my closet with absolutely no idea of what to wear. Because I obviously worried about the wrong first-day stuff...

Do the girls usually wear their uniform pants or skirts here? Or doesn't it matter? I try to remember what Macy wore the last couple of days, but it's all a blank besides the tropical-print snow pants she wore for the snowball fight.

"Skirt," Macy says as she walks out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around her head. "There are wool tights to go with it in the bottom drawer of your dresser."

I close my eyes in relief. Thank God for cousins.

"Awesome, thanks." I slip one of the black skirts off the hanger and step into it, then add a white blouse and black blazer before going over to my dresser for a pair of black tights.

"If you wear the blouse, you've also got to wear the tie," Macy tells me as she opens one of my dresser drawers and pulls out a black tie with purple and silver stripes on it.

"Seriously?" I demand, looking from her to the tie and back again.

"Seriously." She drapes it around my neck. "Do you know how to tie one?"

"Not a clue." I head back toward the closet. "Maybe I should go for one of the polo shirts."

"Don't worry about it. I'll show you. It's a lot easier than it looks."

"If you say so."

She grins. "I do say so."

She starts by draping the tie unevenly around my neck and wrapping the longer end over the shorter end. A couple more wraps and a tuck and pull through—all narrated by my cousin—and I've got a perfectly tied tie around my neck...even if it is a little tight.

"Looks good," Macy says as she steps back to admire her handiwork. "I mean, the knot's not as fancy as some of the guys wear, but it gets the job done."

"Thanks. I'll look up a couple of videos on YouTube this afternoon, make sure I know what I'm doing before I have to tie it again tomorrow."

"It's pretty easy. You'll get the hang of it in no time. In fact—" She breaks off at the loud knock on our door.

"Are you expecting someone?" I ask as I move toward the door, motioning for her to move back toward the bathroom, as all she's currently wearing is a towel.

"No. I usually meet my friends in the cafeteria." Her eyes go wide. "Do you think it's Jaxon?" She whispers his name like she's afraid he'll hear it through the door.

"I didn't think so, no." But now that she's planted the idea in my head... Ugh. My already nervous stomach does a series of somersaults. "What do I do?" My own voice drops to a whisper without the conscious decision to do so on my part. He texted me last night before bed, but I haven't seen him since he came to my room yesterday around lunch, and after lying awake half the night thinking about him, I'm feeling hella awkward.

She looks at me like I'm missing the obvious. "Answer the door?"

"Right." I smooth my sweaty palms down the sides of my skirt and reach for the door handle. I have no idea what to do, what to say...although judging by how tight this ridiculous tie suddenly feels, I may not be able to say anything at all before it actually strangles me.

I glance back at Macy, who shoots me an encouraging thumbs-up one last time, then take as deep a breath as I can manage before pulling open the door.

All my nerves dissipate in the space from one strangled breath to the next, largely because the person standing at our door is most definitely *not* Jaxon Vega.

"Hi, Uncle Finn! How are you?"

"Hi, Gracey girl." He leans down and drops an absentminded kiss on the top of my head. "I just stopped by to check on your ankle and finally deliver your schedule." He holds a blue sheet of paper out to me. "And to wish you luck on your first day of class. You're going to do great!"

I'm not so sure about that, but I'm determined to think positive today, so I smile and say, "Thanks. I'm excited. And my ankle's sore, but okay."

"Good. I made sure you got into that art class you wanted and that you have our best history teacher, since that's your favorite subject. But check over your schedule, make sure you're not repeating any classes. I did my best, but mistakes happen."

He tweaks my cheek like I'm a five-year-old. It's such a Dad thing to do that my heart aches a little.

"I'm sure it's perfect," I tell him.

Macy snorts. "Don't bet on it. If Dad did it himself instead of letting Mrs. Haversham do it, no telling what he's got you signed up for."

"Mrs. Haversham did it," he tells her with a wink. "I just supervised. Brat." He walks over and gives her a one-armed shoulder hug and the same kiss on the top of her head that he gave me.

"Ready for that math test today?" he asks.

"Been ready for a week." She rolls her eyes.

"Good. And how's that English project going? Did you finish—?"

"This is a boarding school," Macy interrupts, smacking lightly at his arm. "That means parents don't get to give their kids the third degree over every assignment."

"That's because they don't know about every assignment. I, however, do. Which means I get to check up on you whenever I want."

"Lucky me," she deadpans.

He just grins. "Exactly."

"Are you going to get out of here so I can get dressed? Grace and I still need to hit the cafeteria before class. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day, after all."

"Not if you waste it on cherry Pop-Tarts."

"Cherry Pop-Tarts are their own food group." She glances my way. "Back me up here, Grace."

"Maybe two food groups, if you count the frosting," I agree. "So are the brown sugar ones."

"Exactly what I'm talking about!"

It's Uncle Finn's turn to roll his eyes. But he drops another kiss on her head before heading for the door. "Do your old man a favor and grab some fruit with those Pop-Tarts, will you?"

"Cherries are fruit," I tease him.

"Not that way, they aren't." He gives me a comforting shoulder squeeze. "Don't forget to stop by my office later. Now that you're feeling better, I want to talk to you about a few things and hear how your first day went."

"It'll be fine, Uncle Finn."

"I'm hoping it will be more than fine. But good or bad, come tell me about it. Okay?"

"Yeah, okay."

"Good. See you later, girls." He smiles at us, then disappears out the door.

Macy shakes her head as she grabs her own school uniform out of the closet. "Just ignore him. My dad's a total dork."

"Most good dads are dorks, aren't they?" I ask as I move to the mirror on my closet door so I can start fixing my hair. "Besides, he reminds me of my dad. It's kind of nice."

She doesn't say anything to that, and when I glance her way, it's to find her staring sadly at me—which is, bar none, the second worst thing about losing my parents. I hate the sympathy, hate the way everyone feels sorry for me and no one knows what to say.

"That was supposed to be a happy comment," I tell her. "You don't need to feel bad."

"I know. It's just that I'm so happy you're here and we have this time to get to know each other. And then it hits me all over again and I feel gross for being happy." She sighs. "Which sounds like I'm making this all about me, but I'm not. I just—"

"Hey, you." I break into what I'm learning could be a really, really long soliloquy. "I get it. And though how I got here sucks, I'm glad we have this time, too. Okay?"

A slow smile takes the place of her worried look. "Yeah, okay."

"Good. Now get dressed. I'm starving."

"On it!" she says, disappearing into the bathroom to do just that.

Twenty minutes later, we finally make it down the back stairs ("sooooo much less crowded," Macy swears) to the cafeteria, after winding our way past *no less* than seven suits of armor, four giant fireplaces, and more columns than existed in all of

Ancient Greece.

Okay, the last might be a slight exaggeration, but only slight. Plus, the fact that they're black instead of white gets them extra points in my book. And that's not even counting the gold filigree around the tops and bottoms of the columns.

I mean, the whole thing is a total head trip. Seriously. Going to school in Alaska is wild enough. Going to school in an actual castle, complete with halls whose bloodred ceilings are lined with Gothic lancet arches, is hella cool.

At least if you don't count all the people staring at me as we make our way through the halls. Macy dismisses it as "new-girl stuff" and tells me to ignore it. But it's pretty hard to do that when people are honest-to-God turning around to stare at me when I pass. I know Macy said they've all been together for a long time, but come on. I can't actually be the first new person to land here, can I? Just the idea is absurd. Schools get new kids all the time—even schools in Alaska.

Macy interrupts my inner diatribe with an excited "We're here!" as we stop in front of three sets of black-and-gold doors. The wood is carved, and I try to get a closer look at the designs, but my cousin is in too big of a hurry to show me the cafeteria. Which...seen one, seen them all, I figure.

But as she throws open one of the doors with all the pomp and flair of a game-show hostess showing me the car behind curtain number one, it's pretty obvious that I'm wrong. Again. Because this cafeteria—and it feels wrong to even refer to the room by such a mundane name—is like nothing I've ever seen before. Ever.

I'm pretty sure it even puts the library to shame.

To begin with, the room is huge, with long walls covered in different murals of dragons and wolves and I don't know what else. Crown molding in black and gold runs around the edges of the ceiling and down the walls, framing each mural like a regular painting. The artist in me is fascinated and wants to spend hours studying each one, but I've got class in half an hour, so it'll have to wait. Plus, there's so much else to see here that I don't know where to look first.

The ceiling is arched and an in-your-face, unapologetic bloodred, overlaid with curved black molding in elaborate geometric patterns. A huge crystal chandelier hangs from the center of each one, casting the whole room in a soft glow that only makes its grandeur more obvious.

There are no picnic-style tables here, no utilitarian trays or plastic silverware. Three long tables covered in tablecloths in shades of gold and black and cream run the length of the room. They are surrounded by tufted, high-backed chairs and set with real china and silverware.

Classical music floats through the room, dark and more than a little eerie. I don't know much about this kind of music, but I know creepy af when I hear it, and this is definitely it.

So much so that I can't resist saying to Macy, "This music is very, um...interesting."

"Danse Macabre' by Camille Saint-Saëns. Overkill, I know, but my dad has it playing in here every year for Halloween. Along with the score from *Jaws* and a few other classics. It just hasn't been changed over yet."

I think about Lia and how she said the same thing about the pillows in the library. In my old school, the Halloween spirit was pretty much exhausted by reading a scary story in English class and a costume contest on the quad at lunch. Katmere Academy takes the holiday to a whole new level.

"It's cool," I say as we make our way along one of the tables until we find a cluster of empty seats. "It's a lot, but Halloween has always been my dad's favorite holiday." "Really? That's so weird, considering my dad hated it. I thought it must have been something that happened when he was a kid, but apparently not, if your dad goes all out for the holiday." I asked Dad once, a few years ago, why he disliked Halloween so much, and he said he would tell me when I was older.

Turns out the universe had other plans.

"Turns out the universe had other plans

"Yeah, that is weird." Macy glances around. "But isn't this place cool? I've been dying for you to see it."

"Totally cool. I want to spend hours just looking at the murals."

"Well, you've got all year, so..." She gestures for me to sit.

"What do you want to eat? Besides cherry Pop-Tarts, I mean."

"I can come with you."

"Next time. Right now you should get off your hurt ankle for a few minutes. Besides, I'm pretty sure today is going to be a little overwhelming. Let me help out where I can."

"It's pretty hard to say no to that," I tell her, because she's right. I'm already overwhelmed, and the day has barely started. I'm also touched by how hard Macy is working to make things easier for me. I smile my thanks at her.

"So don't say no." She pushes me playfully toward a chair. "Just tell me what you want to eat, or I'll bring you seal steak and eggs."

The horror must show on my face, because she bursts out laughing. "How about a pack of cherry Pop-Tarts and some yogurt with canned berries?"

"Canned berries?" I ask, doubtful.

"Yeah, Fiona, our chef, cans them herself when they're in season. Fresh fruit is pretty hard to come by up here once late fall hits. The display at the party the other day was a special treat."

"Oh, right." I feel silly. Of course there aren't any fresh berries in Alaska in November. If a pint of Ben and Jerry's costs ten bucks, I can't imagine what a pint of strawberries would be. "That sounds great. Thanks."

"No problem." She grins at me. "Sit down and take a load off. I'll be right back."

I do as she directs and pick a chair that faces the wall—partly because I really do want to study the closest mural and partly because I'm sick of pretending I don't see people staring at me. At least with my back turned to most of the room, I won't be able to see them and they won't be able to see my face.

The negative is that I also won't be able to watch for Jaxon, and I was really hoping to see him this morning. Which sounds desperate, I know, but I can't stop thinking about everything that happened between us yesterday. I kind of hoped he'd text me this morning, but he hasn't so far.

I want to know what he meant by that journal page, want to know if it means he feels all the wild things I do. It's impossible to imagine that he does—I knew he was out of my league the first day I met him. But that doesn't keep me from wanting him, any more than Macy's warnings do. Or the air of darkness that he wears like a badge of honor...or a set of shackles. I haven't quite figured out which.

There's a part of me that wants to sneak a look behind me, just to see if I can catch a glimpse of him. But it seems way too obvious, at least with half the cafeteria watching me. And they are watching—I can feel their eyes even with my back turned. I know Macy says it's no big deal, that it's just new-girl stuff, but it feels like more than that.

I don't have time to dwell on it, though, because Macy's got a fully loaded tray in her hands and is heading straight for me.

"That looks like more than Pop-Tarts and yogurt," I tease as I help her set it down so she won't spill anything.

"I did fine on the food, but when I got to drinks, I didn't know if you wanted coffee or tea or juice or water or milk, so I

brought one of each."

"Oh, wow. Um, the juice is great."

"Thank God." She holds out a glass of red liquid. "I was afraid you were going to say you wanted the coffee, and then I was going to die. Especially since Cam drinks tea, so I can't steal his when he gets here."

She flops dramatically into the chair across from me.

"I promise, the coffee's all yours," I tell her with a laugh. "And you picked the right juice—cranberry is my favorite."

"Good." She takes a long sip of the hot drink just to prove a point. "I thought all you California girls were Starbucks addicts."

"I guess Cam and I have something in common. It was always more about tea at my house. My mom was an amazing herbalist. She made her own tea blends, and they were fantastic." It's been a month, but I can still almost taste her lemon-thyme-verbena tea. I have a few bags of it in my carry-on, but I don't want to drink it. And truth be told, I'm afraid to even smell it in case I start crying and never stop.

"I can only imagine."

There's something in the way Macy says it that gets my attention, that has me trying to figure out what she means. I wait for her to say more, but then her eyes go wide, and she starts choking on a sip of coffee.

Before I can turn around to see what's got her so discombobulated, someone asks, "Is this seat taken?"

And then I don't have to turn around at all. Because I'd know that voice anywhere.

Jaxon Vega just asked to sit next to me. In front of everyone. It really is a brave new world.

Ten-Degree Weather Gives a Whole New Meaning to the Cool Kids' Table

m, yeah. Sure. Of course." As I turn to look at him, the words pour out of my mouth without any rhyme or reason, making me sound—and feel—like a jerk.

Jaxon inclines his head, lifts a brow. "So it is taken, then?" Forget sounding like a jerk. I am a jerk. "No! I mean, yes. I mean..." I stop, take a deep breath, and then blow it out slowly. "The seat isn't taken. You can sit down if you'd like."

"I would like." He grabs the chair and turns it around so that when he drops down into it, he's facing the back of the chair, one elbow draped negligently over the top.

It's a completely ridiculous way to sit, especially on a chair this elegant...but it's also superhot. And it's pretty much been my kryptonite since Moises de la Cruz did it at a pool party when we were in seventh grade.

What can I say? I'm weak.

Guess I'm not the only weak one, though, because Macy makes another choked sound as she stares behind me—this one worse than the last. I tear my eyes away from Jaxon long enough to make sure that sip of coffee isn't actually killing her. Thankfully, it's not, but the fact that the other members of the Order are currently settling themselves down at the table with us just might.

"How's your ankle?" Jaxon asks, his dark gaze sliding over me in what I know is concern but what feels a little like a caress.

"Better. Thanks for...yesterday."

"Which part?" The crooked grin is back, and this time when he looks me over, it feels a *lot* like a caress.

But just because I'm flustered doesn't mean I'm a pushover. "The waffles. Obviously."

One of the members of the Order snorts at my answer, then darts a quick look at Jaxon as he tries to smother the sound. Jaxon just kind of rolls his eyes, though, and gives a little nod in his direction. Which makes the guy laugh again and has the added effect of relaxing all the other guys as well.

"Obviously." He shakes his head, looks away. But his smile doesn't fade. "So you're planning on going to class today."

It's not a question, but I answer anyway. "Yeah. It's time."

He nods like he knows what I'm talking about. "What's your first period?"

"I don't remember." I pull the blue schedule Uncle Finn gave me from my jacket pocket. "Looks like Brit Lit with Maclean."

"I'm in that class," says one of the other members of the Order. He's black, with friendly eyes and the hottest set of locks I've ever seen. "You'll like her. She's cool. I'm Mekhi, by the way, and I'm happy to walk you to class if you want, show you where it is."

Macy makes yet another choking sound—I'm beginning to think her death really is imminent—at the same time that Jaxon replies, "Yeah, that's going to happen."

The other guys laugh, but I don't get the joke. So I just kind of smile and say, "Thanks, Mekhi. I'd appreciate it, if you wouldn't mind."

That only makes them laugh harder.

I give Jaxon a WTF look, but he's just kind of shaking his head at them. Then he leans in and says, "I'll walk you to class, Grace."

He's so close that his breath tickles my ear, sending shivers down my spine that have nothing to do with Alaska and everything to do with the fact that I want this guy. That, despite all the warnings and bad behavior, I really do think I'm falling for Jaxon Vega.

"That would—" My voice breaks, and I have to clear my throat a couple of times before I can try again. "That would be nice, too."

"It would be nice." There's amusement in his voice, but when our eyes meet, there's no trace of laughter in his. There's also no trace of the coldness that's as much a part of him as the dark hair and long, lean body. Instead, there's a heat—an intensity—that has my hands shaking and my knees going weak.

"Should we head over now?" The question is ripped from my dry throat.

He looks pointedly at my tray. "You should eat now."

"You should eat, too." I reach for the silver package on my tray, hold it out to him.

He looks from me to the breakfast pastries and back again. "Pop-That I'm hungry for."

This time, Macy's not the one making the choking sound. I look up, tracing it to its origin—the only member of the Order who looks like he might be Native Alaskan, a guy with bronze skin and long, dark hair tied into a neat ponytail at the nape of his neck.

"Something funny, Rafael?" Jaxon asks, eyes narrowed and tone silky smooth.

"Absolutely not," he answers but glances at me even as he says it, eyes brimming with mischief and delight. "I think I'm

going to like you, Grace."

"And here the day was going so well."

He grins. "Yeah, definitely going to like you."

"Don't feel too flattered, Grace. Rafael's not exactly the most discerning guy around," says one of the others, a boy with twinkling blue eyes and gold hoop earrings.

"Like you are, Liam?" Rafael shoots back. "The last girl you dated was a barracuda."

"I'm pretty sure that's an insult to barracudas everywhere," chimes in another one of Jaxon's friends, his Spanish accent sexily rolling his Rs.

"Luca knows what I'm talking about," Rafael says.

"Because Luca's dating history is so impressive?" Jaxon drawls, joining the conversation for the first time.

The quip is so unexpected—so what I'm used to from his texts but not in person—that I can't help staring at him. Then again, everything about this morning has been unexpected—especially the dynamic among the members of the Order. Every time I've seen them, they've appeared so tough and unapproachable. So unfeeling.

But sitting here with one another—and no one but Macy and me to witness it, since Cam and his group took one look at who was sitting with us and headed in the other direction—they're just like any other group of friends. Except funnier. And way, way hotter. Knowing he's got friends like this—and that he can be a friend like this—makes me like Jaxon even more.

Jaxon catches me staring and raises a questioning brow in my direction.

I just shrug at him like it's no big deal and reach for my glass. Then nearly choke at the look in his eyes as he watches me. Because there's a craving there, a dark and devastating desperation that has my breath stuttering in my chest and heat

blooming deep inside me.

He holds my gaze for one second, two. Then he slowly blinks, and when he opens his eyes again, the emptiness is back.

And still, I watch him. Still, I can't look away. Because there's something just as beautiful—and just as devastating—in their emptiness as there is in their heat. Eventually, though, I force myself to look down. Mostly because if I don't, I'm afraid I'll do something foolish like throw myself at Jaxon in front of the entire school.

Turning away from him, I forcibly yank my attention back to the conversation at hand, just in time to hear Luca say, "Hey, now. How was I supposed to know Angie was a soul-sucking demon?"

"Ummm, because we told you so?" Mekhi answers.

"Yeah, but I thought you were biased. You didn't like her from the start."

"Because she was a soul-sucking demon," Liam repeats. "What part of that are you not getting?"

"What can I say?" Luca gives a careless shrug. "The heart wants what the heart wants."

"Until what the heart wants tries to kill you," Rafael teases.

"Sometimes even then." The words are quiet, spoken from the haunted-looking guy sitting to Macy's right.

"Seriously, Byron?" Mekhi grouses. "Why you always got to shut the conversation down?"

"I was just making an observation."

"Yeah, a depressing observation. You need to lighten up, man."

Byron just stares at him, lips twisted in a tiny little smile that makes him look like a modern-day embodiment of his poet namesake.

Mad, bad, and dangerous to know.

The famous quote from Lady Caroline Lamb goes through

my mind. But I'm not focused on Byron's wavy black hair and dimples when I think about her words. No, in my head, they're all about Jaxon, with his scarred face and cold eyes and smile that borders on cruel at least half the time.

Definitely bad. Definitely dangerous. As for mad...I don't know yet, but something tells me I'm going to find out.

When I think of him like that, I wonder what the hell I'm doing even contemplating feeling the way I do. After all, in San Diego, dark and dangerous wasn't exactly my type. Then again, maybe that's because I never ran into the genuine article back home. Here in Alaska... Well, all I'm saying is, there's a reason half the girls in the school are swooning over Jaxon.

Besides, there's more to him than meets the eye. No matter how angry he is, he's never been anything but gentle with me. Even that first day, when he was so obnoxious, he still never did anything that made me uncomfortable. And he's certainly never hurt me. To everyone else, he might be as dangerous as Macy warns. But to me, he seems more misunderstood than malicious, more broken than bad.

Besides, Byron called it when he implied the heart wants what the heart wants, even when it's bad. And no matter how many warnings I get about Jaxon, I'm pretty sure he's what my heart wants.

Suddenly, a weird kind of chiming sound cuts through Dvořák's "The Noonday Witch" (if I'm not mistaken) that's currently playing over the cafeteria's loudspeakers. "What is that?" I ask, looking around to see if we're suddenly being invaded by a bunch of triangle-playing guerrillas.

"The bell," Macy says. They're the first two words she's managed to choke out since the Order took up residence next to us, and all seven of us turn to her in surprise. Which just makes her flash a small little smile before shoving half a PopTart in her mouth.

"You still didn't eat," Jaxon says. And then he picks a Pop-Tart and hands it to me.

"Seriously?" I take it, because I know he's just going to stand there holding it until I do. But I'm still going to call him on it. Because I'm smart enough to know that if I let him get away with the small things, he'll try his best to steamroll me with everything else, too. "I'm pretty sure I can figure out for myself if I'm hungry or not."

He shrugs. "A girl's got to eat."

"A girl can decide that for herself. Especially since the guy sitting next to her didn't eat anything, either."

Mekhi lets out a little whoop. "That's right, Grace. Make sure he doesn't walk all over you."

Jaxon gives him a look that sends a chill right through me, but Mekhi just rolls his eyes, although I notice that he *does* shut his mouth for pretty much the first time since he sat down. Not that I blame him. If Jaxon looked at me like that, I think I might run for the hills.

"What classroom are you going to?" Jaxon asks as we maneuver our way through the suddenly bustling cafeteria. It's easier than it should be, considering the mad stampede toward the doors that is currently going on. But as long as Jaxon is in the lead, the sea of students does more than just part. It pretty much leaps out of the way.

I fumble for my schedule again, but before I can so much as pull it out, Mekhi answers, "A246," right before he disappears into the crowd.

"Apparently, A246," I repeat, tongue firmly in cheek.

"Apparently." He moves slightly ahead of me to push open the door. As he holds it for me, not one person darts through. Instead, they all wait patiently as I walk through, and I have the fleeting thought that this is more than just popularity, more than just fear.

This must be what royalty feels like.

It seems absurd to even think something so bizarre, but I make it through the door and down the hall without another body—besides Jaxon's—coming within five feet of me. And I don't care whether I'm in an elite boarding school in Alaska or a crowded public high school in San Diego, that is *not* normal.

I also realize that the same thing happened yesterday before the snowball fight. No matter how crowded the hall got or how much jostling went on, no one so much as touched Jaxon—or Macy and me, as long as he was standing with us. "So what do you do to deserve all this?" I ask as we move toward the staircase.

"Deserve all what?"

I roll my eyes at him, figuring he's messing with me. But the blank look he gives me says otherwise. "Come on, Jaxon. How do you not see what's going on here?"

He glances around, clearly mystified. "What's going on?"

Because I still can't decide if he's playing with me or if he really is this obtuse, I just shake my head and say, "Never mind." Then plow ahead and pretend that I don't notice everyone staring at me even as they scramble to get out of my way.

So yeah, that whole blending-in plan I hatched in San Diego? Officially dead on arrival.

"To Be or Not to Be" Is a Question, Not a Pickup Line

axon walks me right up to my classroom door—which we get to in what I'm guessing is record time, considering there's no one else in the room, not even the teacher.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" I ask as we step inside. "Yes."

"How do you know?" I glance at the clock. Class should start in less than three minutes, and still nobody's here. "Maybe we should check if it got—"

"They're waiting for me to either sit down or leave, Grace. Once one of those things happens, they'll come in."

"Sit down or—" I goggle at him. "So you were just messing with me in the hallway? You do notice how people treat you?"

"I'm not blind. And even if I was, it would still be hard to miss."

"It's madness!"

He nods. "It is."

"That's all you've got to say about it? If you know how bizarre it is, why don't you do something to stop it?"

"Like what?" He gives me that obnoxious smirk from the first day, the one that made me want to punch him. Or kiss him.

Just the thought has my stomach spinning and has me taking a cautious step back.

He doesn't like the added distance, at least not if his narrowed eyes can be believed. And the way he takes two steps toward me before continuing. "Stand up at the pep rally and reassure everyone that I'm not going to eat them if they get too close? Somehow I don't think they'll believe me."

"Personally, I think they're more worried about being thrown in high school jail than getting eaten—"

The smirk is back. "You might be surprised."

"Well, then, you should reassure them. Be friendly. You know, show them that you're harmless."

I feel ridiculous even before that left eyebrow of his goes up. "Is that what you think? That I'm *harmless*?"

Jaxon doesn't sound insulted so much as astonished, and really, I can't blame him. Because I've never met anyone *less* harmless in my life. Just looking at him feels perilous. Standing next to him feels like walking a hundred-foot-high tightrope without a net. And wanting him the way I do...wanting him feels like opening a vein just to watch myself bleed.

"I think you're just as dangerous as everyone gives you credit for. I also think—"

"Yo, Jaxon, at some point, class does need to start," Mekhi interrupts as he saunters into the room—apparently the only one in this class who isn't afraid of Jaxon. "You going to take off, or are you going to keep everyone standing around watching you try to woo this girl?"

Jaxon whips his head around to glare at Mekhi, who raises his arms defensively and takes a big step back. And that's before Jaxon's voice drops a full octave as he growls, "I'll leave when I'm ready."

"I think you should probably go now," I tell him, even though

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I'm as reluctant to see him go as he apparently is to leave. "The teacher needs to start class. Besides, aren't you the one who told me to keep my head down and not draw attention to myself?" "That was the old plan."

"The old plan?" I stare at him, bemused. "When did we get

a new plan?" He smiles at me. "Two nights ago. I told you it wasn't going

to be easy."

"Wait a minute." My stomach drops. "Are you telling me the cafeteria, the walk to class... This was all because of Flint?" Just the thought makes me feel awful.

"Flint who?" he deadpans.

"Jaxon."

"It was all because of you," he tells me.

I'm not sure I believe him, but before I can probe any more, he reaches out and takes hold of one of my curls in that way he does. He rubs it between his fingers for a couple of seconds as he watches me with those unfathomable eyes of his. "I love the way your hair smells." Then he stretches out the curl before letting it go so it can boing back into place.

"You need to go," I tell him again, though the words are a lot more breathless this time around.

He doesn't look happy, but I stare him down.

It takes a few seconds, but eventually Jaxon nods. He steps back, a grudging look on his face, and it's only as he moves away that I realize my heart is beating like a heavy-metal drummer.

"Text me a pic of your schedule," he says as he moves toward the door.

"Why?"

"So I know where to meet you later." His face melts into a grin, and the butterflies I always feel when he's around take flight in my stomach.

"I have AP Physics right now, so I'm out in the physics lab and won't make it back before you have to go to your second period. But I'll catch up with you later. If I can't, I'll have one of the others walk you to class."

Yeah, because that will help me blend in. "You don't have to do that."

"It's not a problem, Grace."

I sigh. "What I mean is I don't want you to do that. I just want to get to class like everyone else. On my own."

"I get that. I do," he continues when I give him a disbelieving look. "But I meant it when I said you aren't safe here. At least let me watch out for you for a few days, until you learn the ropes."

"Jaxon-"

"Please, Grace."

It's the please that gets me, considering I'm pretty positive Jaxon isn't the kind of guy to ask for something when he can order it. And though I think he's overreacting, he seems really worried, and if this will set his mind at ease, I guess I can handle it for a few days.

A very few days.

"Fine." I tell him, giving in as gracefully as I can. "But only until the end of the week, okay? After that, I'm on my own."

"How about, we renegotiate at the end of the week and see—"
"Jaxon!"

"Okay, okay!" He puts his hands up. "Whatever you say, Grace."

"Yeah, right. That's a bunch of—" I break off because he's gone again. Because of course he is. Because that's the story of our lives. He disappears, and I get disappeared on.

One of these days, I'm going to turn the tables.

He's right, though. As soon as he leaves, the classroom floods with people. I try to stand to the side, waiting to see where there

might be an empty seat, but Mekhi nods me over to the desk next to him in the second row.

I go, even though I don't know if a person normally sits there, because it's nice to have someone in this class to talk to. Especially since he's grinning at me while everyone else is doing the same old stare-and-glare.

The teacher—Ms. Maclean—bustles in after everyone has taken their seats. She's dressed in a flowing purple caftan, her wild red hair piled atop her head in a haphazard bun that looks like it's going to fall down at any second. She's not young, but she's not old, either-maybe forty or so-and she's got a huge smile on her face as she tells everyone to open their copies of Hamlet to Act II.

Half the class has books and the other half has laptops, so I pull out my phone and start looking for a public-domain copy, since I left my book in California. But I've barely typed "Hamlet" in the search bar before Ms. Maclean drops a dog-eared copy on my desk.

"Hello, Grace," she murmurs in a low voice. "You can borrow one of mine until you can find one of your own online. And since you look like the shy type—despite your association with Katmere's most notorious student-I won't make you stand up and introduce yourself to the class. But know that you're welcome here, and if you need anything, feel free to stop by my office hours. They're posted by the door."

"Thanks." I duck my head as my cheeks start to get warm. "I appreciate it."

"No worries." She gives my shoulder a comforting squeeze as she heads back to the front of the room. "We're excited to have you here."

Mekhi leans over as I pick up the book and says, "Act two, scene two."

Thanks, I mouth back just as Ms. Maclean claps her hands. Then, in true drama queen-style, she throws her arms wide and says in a booming but perfect iambic pentameter:

"Something have you heard

Of Hamlet's transformation; so call it, Sith nor the exterior nor the inward man Resembles that it was."

We spend the rest of the class discussing Hamlet's shift from perfect prince to total downer. With Ms. Maclean doing her drama thing in the front of the room and Mekhi making sly comments in my ear every couple of minutes, it's a lot more fun than it sounds. Mekhi may look intimidating, but he's way more chill than Jaxon—and also really funny. It's easy to be around him, and I end up enjoying class a lot more than I expected to, especially considering I've already read the play once this year.

In fact, I enjoy it so much that I'm a little disappointed when the bell rings, at least until I remember that I've got art next. Art's been my favorite class pretty much since elementary school, and I'm excited to see what it's like here. But it means heading out to the art studio, and that means a detour to my room, where I can put on at least a couple more layers to protect myself from the cold.

It's only a ten-minute walk to the studio, so I don't need to put on everything I did the last two times I went outside. But I do need a heavy sweatshirt and a long coat—plus gloves and a hat—if I don't have any plans to get frostbite. Which I definitely don't.

I just hope I have enough time to make it to my room and out to the art studio before the next bell rings. Just in case, I speed up a little, hoping to make it to the main staircase before the masses.

"Hey! What's your rush, New Girl?"

I glance over at Flint with a grin as he comes up on my left

side. "I have a name, you know."

"Oh, right." He pretends to think. "What is it again?"

"Bite me."

"That's an interesting first name...and a phrase you might want to be careful saying around here."

"And why is that exactly?" I lift a brow at him as we weave our way through the halls. Unlike earlier with Jaxon, the whole parting of the halls thing is currently nowhere in effect. In fact, traversing the school with Flint is an awful lot like playing this old video game my dad used to like, where you have to race to get the frog across the street before one of the eight million cars going by splats it on the pavement.

In other words, it's a normal high school hallway. I can feel myself relaxing a little more with each near-collision.

"You're actually going to pretend you don't know?"

"Know what?"

Flint studies me, then shakes his head when I look back at him, brows raised in a definite WTF. "My mistake. Never mind."

There's something about the way he says it that has an uneasy feeling sliding through me. It's the same feeling I got when I saw Jaxon and Lia outside without a jacket yesterday.

The same feeling I got when Flint fell out of that tree and walked away with only a few bruises.

The same feeling I got when Lia was chanting in tongues in the library, even though she had no idea what I was talking about when I mentioned several of the Alaskan languages.

"I'm not dense, you know. I am aware that something isn't quite right here, even if I don't know what it is yet."

It's the first time I've acknowledged my suspicions even to myself, and it feels good to give voice to it all, instead of letting the thoughts fester below the surface.

"Are you?" Suddenly Flint is right up in my face, his whole

body only inches away from mine. "Are you really?"

I don't back down, despite the sudden desperation in his voice. "I am. Now, do you want to tell me what it is?"

It takes a minute, but when he next speaks, the worry is gone. And so is everything else except the teasing drawl that's as much a part of him as his amber eyes and muscles. It's like the warning never happened, even before he says, "Where's the fun in that?"

"You've got an odd definition of fun."

"You have no idea." He wiggles his brows. "So what are you up to anyway?"

I stare at him. "Do you ever finish any conversation without starting another?"

"Never. It's part of my charm."

"Yeah, just keep telling yourself that."

"I will." He walks several more feet with me, happily bopping along to a song that's only in his head. "Where are you going? The classrooms are back that way."

"I've got to go to my room and grab some warmer clothes. I have art next, and I'll freeze if I go outside like this."

"Wait." He stops dead. "No one told you about the tunnels?"

"What tunnels?" I eye him suspiciously. "Are you messing with me again?"

"I'm not, I swear. There's a whole network of tunnels that run under the school and lead to the different outbuildings."

"Seriously? This is Alaska—how did they dig tunnels in the frozen ground?"

"I don't know. How do they drill in the frozen ground? Besides, summer is a thing." He gives me the best Boy Scout look in his repertoire. "I promise. The tunnels are real. I just can't believe the omnipotent Jaxon Vega forgot to mention them to you."

"Are you kidding me? You're going to start in on Jaxon now?"

"Of course not. I'm just saying, I'm the one telling you about the tunnels and keeping you from freezing off all the important parts of your anatomy. He could have mentioned them to you before sending you out into the cruel, cruel winter."

"It's fall." I roll my eyes. "And are we going to do this every time we talk about Jaxon?"

He holds his hands up in mock innocence. "As far as I'm concerned, we *never* have to talk about Jaxon."

"Funny claim coming from a guy who keeps bringing him up."

"Because I'm worried about you. I swear." He draws an X over his heart. "Jaxon's a complicated guy, Grace. You should stay away from him."

"I find it interesting that he says the exact same thing about you."

"Yeah, well, nothing says you have to listen to him." He makes a disgusted face.

"Nothing says I have to listen to you, either." I give him a shit-eating grin. "You see my conundrum, right?"

"Ooh. The new girl's got some claws after all. I like it."

I roll my eyes. "You're a total weirdo. You know that, right?"

"Know it? I own it, baby."

I can't help but laugh as he makes a ridiculous face at me, crossing his eyes and sticking out his tongue. "So are you going to show me these tunnels sometime this year, or am I going to have to do my best impression of the abominable snowwoman?"

"Definitely the tunnels. Turns out I'm headed that way myself. Come on."

He reaches for my hand and makes an abrupt left turn, tugging me down a narrow corridor that I don't think I would have even noticed if he hadn't dragged me into it.

It's long and winding and slopes down so gradually that it takes me a minute to notice we're descending. Flint keeps a

firm grip on my hand as we pass a couple of students coming the other way.

The hallway is so narrow that all four of us have to press our backs up against the wall to keep from crashing into one another as we pass.

"How much farther is it?" I ask as we get back to walking normally. Or at least as normally as we can walk as the ceiling starts to get lower as well. If this keeps up, we'll be duck-walking through this thing like they had to do in the pyramids.

"Just another minute to the tunnel entrance and then a fiveminute walk to the art studio."

"Okay, cool." I pull out my phone to check how we are on time—seven minutes—and see that Jaxon has texted me twice. The first one is just a string of question marks that I assume is a reminder about my schedule. And the second is the start of a joke:

Jaxon: What did the pirate say when he turned 80?

Oh my God, I've totally greated a monster. And I love is

Oh my God. I've totally created a monster. And I love it.

I text him back a laughing emoji along with a string of question marks of my own. I also text a copy of my schedule—not because he demanded one earlier but because I want to see if he'll follow through and find me again. Once the texts are delivered, I shove my phone back in my pocket and try to tell myself that I don't care that much if he shows up or not. But it's a lie, and I am very well aware of that fact.

The light is getting dimmer and dimmer the farther we go down this corridor, and if I were with anyone but Flint (or Jaxon or Macy), I'd be getting nervous. Not because I think there's anything wrong necessarily, but because I can't help wondering: If the walkway to the tunnels is this creepy, what are the actual tunnels going to look like?

"Okay, here we go," Flint finally says as we come up against an

old wooden door—one that's protected by an electronic keypad that has my eyebrows lifting to my hairline. Nothing in my life has ever looked as incongruous as that keypad in the middle of this musty, dusty corridor with a door that looks to be at least a hundred years old.

He punches in a five-digit code so fast that I don't see any number past the first three. It takes a second, but then the light above the door flashes green at the same time as the door unlocks.

Flint glances over his shoulder at me as he reaches to pull open the door. "You ready?"

"Yeah, of course." Another glance at my phone tells me we better hustle or I'm going to be late.

Flint holds the door for me, and I smile my thanks at him, but the second I take a step over the threshold, a little voice deep inside me starts screeching—telling me not to go any farther.

Telling me to run.

Telling me to get the hell away from these tunnels and never look back.

But Flint's waiting for me to go. Plus, if I don't get moving, I'll be seriously late to art. Definitely not the first impression I wanted to make on the teacher of my favorite class.

Besides, this is Flint. The guy who jumped out of a tree and took the brunt of a very nasty fall just to save me. It's ridiculous to think that I might have to run from him of all people, no matter what Jaxon says.

Which is why I shove all the new and bizarre misgivings I'm suddenly having back down where they belong. And walk straight across the threshold.

With Friends Like These, Everyone Needs Hard Hats

Flint follows me through, then lets the door close behind us with a solid *thump*.

The room is dim, even dimmer than the passageway here, and it takes a minute for my eyes to adjust.

"What is this place?" I demand once they do. "It doesn't look like a tunnel."

In fact, what it looks like is a prison. Or at least the holding area of a jail. There are several cells lining the wall in front of us, each one equipped with a bed—and, more importantly, two sets of shackles. Castle or not, Alaska or not, I am *not* okay with what I'm seeing. At all.

"I think we should go back," I tell him, pulling at the door handle, to no avail. "How do I get this door open?" There's no keypad on this side, nothing I can see that will get us out of here.

"You have to open it from the other side of this room," Flint tells me, looking amused. "Don't worry. We'll be through here in a second."

"I thought we were going to the tunnels. I've got to get to art, Flint."

"This is the way to the tunnels. Chill, Grace."

"What tunnels? This is a dungeon!" Alarm is racing through me at this point, my brain warning me that I don't know this guy that well. That anything could happen down here. That— I take a deep breath, try to shut down the panic tearing through me.

"Trust me." He puts a hand on my lower back, starts guiding me forward. I don't want to go, but at this point, it's not exactly like I've got a dozen alternatives. I can pound on the door, hoping that someone hears me, or I can trust Flint to do what he says and get me to the tunnel I need. Considering he's been nothing but kind to me since I got here, I let him propel me forward and pray I'm not making a mistake.

We walk all the way to the end of the room, past four separate cells, and I don't say a word of complaint. But when Flint stops in front of the fifth cell and tries to get me to go in, my trust and patience come to an abrupt end.

"What are you doing?" I demand. Or screech, depending on your point of view. "I'm not going in there."

He looks at me like I'm being completely irrational. "It's where the entrance to the tunnels is."

"I don't see an entrance," I snap at him. "All I see are bars. And shackles."

"It's not what it looks like, I swear. These are secret tunnels, and when they built the castle a hundred years ago, they did a really good job of disguising the entrance."

"A little too good a job, in my opinion. I want to go back up, Flint. I'll make up some excuse for my art teacher for being late, but I-"

"It's okay." For the first time, he looks concerned. "We use these tunnels all the time. I promise I won't let anything happen to you."

"Yeah, but—" I break off as the door at the other end of the room opens. And in walks Lia.

"Hey, hold the door!" I call to her, slipping out of Flint's loose hold and making a mad dash back toward the only obvious exit point in this hellhole of a room.

But she obviously doesn't hear me. The door slams shut behind her. Damn it.

"Grace!" She looks surprised to see me as she fishes a pair of earbuds out of her ears. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm taking her to the tunnels." Flint shoots me an exasperated look as he catches up to me. "She's got art."

"Oh yeah? With Kaufman?" Lia looks interested.

"Yeah."

"Cool. Me too." She gives Flint a cool glance. "I'll take it from here."

"No need for that," he answers. "I'm going that way, too."

"You don't have to bother."

"No bother. Right, Grace?" He grins at me, but this time he sure seems to be showing a lot of teeth.

Then again, who can blame him? He was trying to help me, and I freaked out on him for no reason. "If you're sure."

"Oh, I'm sure." He loops an arm through mine. "I would love to escort you ladies to class."

"Lucky us." Lia's own smile is saccharin sweet as she takes hold of my other arm and starts to walk us back toward the end of the room. As we move—both of them holding on to me—I can't

help but feel a little like a ping-pong ball caught between them.

Lia doesn't let go until we reach the final cell. She marches

inside and grabs hold of one of the arm shackles—exactly as Flint was aiming to do when I freaked out—and then pulls, hard.

The portion of the stone wall the shackles are attached to opens wide. She glances back at us, eyebrows raised. "Ready?"

Flint looks at me, tilts his head questioningly.

I feel myself blushing yet again, this time out of shame.

"Sorry. I freaked out when I shouldn't have."

He shrugs. "No worries. I guess I come down here so often, I forget how creepy it looks."

"So creepy," I tell him as we move into the cell. "And when you reached for that shackle—" $\,$

He laughs. "You didn't really think I was going to chain you up down here, did you?"

"Of course she did," Lia tells him as we walk through the trick door and she pulls it closed behind us. "I wouldn't trust you, either. You look like exactly the kind of pervert she should never be alone with."

"And what kind of pervert is that exactly?" he demands, glancing between the two of us.

Suddenly, I remember what Macy said about Jaxon when she was trying to warn me off him, and I can't resist. "You know, the kind who starves a girl so he can make a dress out of her skin."

They both stare at me like I've lost my mind completely. Lia looks taken aback but amused, and Flint...Flint looks more offended than anyone *ever*. It's totally inappropriate, but I can't help laughing. Because, come on. Who hasn't seen that movie—or at least heard of it?

"Excuse me?" he says after a second, more ice in those words than in the entire school grounds outside.

"From Silence of the Lambs? That's what the serial killer Jodie Foster is trying to catch does to his victims. It's why she needs Hannibal Lecter."

"Never saw the movie."

"Oh, well, he would kidnap girls and-"

"Yeah, I got it." He lets go of my arm for the first time since Lia showed up. "For the record, clothes made of skin, not so much my style."

"Obviously. That's why I made the joke." When he doesn't

be mad. I was just playing." "Don't waste your breath," Lia tells me as we make our way

farther into the tunnels. "He's a total drag-" "Bite me," Flint growls.

She eyes him scornfully. "You wish."

"I wish you'd try." He returns her look with interest.

Wow, this devolved quickly.

"Don't we need to get to class?" I ask, determined to interrupt whatever this is before it gets even worse. "The bell's going to ring in a minute."

"Don't worry about it," Lia tells me. "Kaufman knows it's a pain to get to her class, so she doesn't sweat it."

But she does pick up the pace—after giving Flint one last look that's a cross between a snarl and a smirk.

I follow her, leaving Flint to bring up the rear, as I figure we'll all do better with me as a buffer between them. For the first time since last night, when Macy tried to explain that I can't be friends with both Jaxon and Flint, I actually start to believe her. Lia's obviously Team Jaxon despite whatever I witnessed between them the other day, and look how well this little excursion is going.

We're moving fast through the tunnels now, so I don't get to check them out the way I really want to. Still, the recessed lighting, dim as it might be, gives me at least a decent view of where I'm walking. And I have to say, terrifying entrance notwithstanding, these things are freaking cool.

The walls are made entirely of different-colored stones mostly white and black, but there are colored stones, too. They gleam red and blue and green even in the faint light, and I can't help reaching out to touch one of the bigger ones, just to see what it feels like. Cool, obviously, but also smooth, polished, like a gemstone. For a second, I wonder if that's what they are. But then I dismiss it as ridiculous, because what school (even a fancy, rich one like Katmere Academy) has the money to embed gemstones in the walls?

The floor is made of white brick, as are a bunch of the columns we pass as we walk. But what really gets me is the art that is down here—bone-like sculptures embedded in the walls, hanging from the ceiling, even resting on pedestals in various alcoves along the way.

It's an obvious homage to the Paris catacombs, where seven million skeletons are laid to rest—or used for macabre decorations throughout. And I can't help wondering if the school's art classes added the "bone" sculptures to the tunnels here. I also want to know what art supplies the bones are really made of.

But trying to figure that out has to wait, too, if I have any hope of making it to art class even close to on time.

As we follow the tunnel, we get to a kind of rotunda-type room that pretty much has my eyes bugging out of my head. It's obviously a main hub for the tunnels, because eleven other tunnels feed into it as well. But that's not what has my eyes going wide, even though I have no idea which of the other tunnels we should take.

No, what has my mouth falling open and my eyes pretty much bugging out of my head is the giant chandelier hanging in the center of the room, unlit candles at the end of each arm. But it's not the size of the chandelier or the fact that there are actual candles in it that catches my attention (although, fire code, anyone?). It's the fact that the chandelier, like so many of the other decorations down here, looks to be made entirely of human bones.

I know it's just art, and the bones are made of plastic or whatever, but they sure look realistic hanging off the chandelier—so much so that a chill creeps down my spine. This is more than an homage to the catacombs. It's like someone actually tried to

re-create them.

"Why are you stopping?" Flint asks, following my gaze.

"This is bizarre. You know that, right?"

He grins. "A little bit. But it's also cool, isn't it?"

"Totally cool." I step farther into the room to get a better look. "I wonder how long it took. I mean, it had to be a class art project, right? Not just one student."

"Art project?" Flint looks confused.

"We don't know," Lia interjects. "It was done years before we got here—years before your uncle or any of the other current teachers got here, too. But yeah, it had to be a class project. No way one artist could do all this in a semester or even a year."

"It's amazing. I mean, so elaborate and lifelike. Or...you know what I mean."

She nods. "Yeah."

There are more bones above each of the tunnels, as well as plaques bearing inscriptions in a language I don't recognize. One of the Alaskan languages, I'm sure, but I want to know which one. So I take out my phone and snap a pic of the closest plaque, figuring I'll google it along with the cottage names.

"We need to go," Flint says as I start to take a second pic. "Class is starting."

"Oh, right. Sorry." I glance around as I shove my phone back in my blazer pocket. "Which tunnel are we taking?"

"The third one to the left," Lia says.

We head that way, but just as we're about to reach it, a low-grade tremor rips through the room. At first, I think I'm imagining it, but as the bones in the chandelier start to clink together in the eeriest sound imaginable, I realize there's nothing imaginary about it.

We're standing in the middle of a musty, crumbling old tunnel just as the earth begins to shake for real this time.

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ia's eyes go wide as the chandelier sways above us. "We need to get out of this room."

"We need to get out of these tunnels!" I answer. "How sturdy do you think they are?"

"They won't collapse," she assures me, but she starts moving toward the tunnel that's supposed to lead to the art studio pretty damn quickly.

Not that I blame her—Flint and I are moving fast, too.

It's not a big earthquake, at least not the kind that Alaska is known for. But it's not like the small tremors that I've felt since coming here, either. Based on what I've experienced back home, this one is an easy seven on the Richter scale.

Lia and Flint must realize that at the same time I do, because once we hit the new tunnel, our fast walk becomes a run.

"How far to the exit?" I demand. My phone is vibrating in my pocket, a series of texts coming in fast and furious. I ignore them as the ground continues to move.

"Maybe another couple hundred yards," Flint tells me.

"Are we going to make it?"

"Absolutely. We-" He breaks off as a loud rumbling sound

comes from the ground, followed closely by a violent shift that turns the quake from rolling to shaking.

My legs turn to rubber, and I start to stumble. Flint grabs me above the elbow to steady me, then uses his grip to propel me through the tunnel so fast that I'm not sure my feet are even touching the ground anymore. Unlike on the stairs a few days ago, this time I'm not complaining.

Lia's in front of us, running even more quickly, though I don't know how that's possible, considering just how fast Flint has us moving.

Finally, the ground starts to slant upward, and relief sweeps through me. We're almost there, almost out of this place, and so far the tunnels have held. Twenty more seconds and a door looms ahead of us. Unlike the one we originally came through, this one is covered in drawings of dragons and wolves and witches and what I'm pretty sure is a vampire on a snowboard.

It's all done graffiti-style, using every color imaginable. And it is totally badass. Another day—when the earth isn't literally moving under my feet—I'll stop to admire the artwork. For now, I wait for Lia to punch in the code—59678 (I watch carefully this time)—and then the three of us burst through the door and into what is obviously a very large art supply closet.

The earthquake stops just as the door closes behind us. I exhale in relief as Flint drops my arm, then bend over and try to catch my breath. He might have been doing most of the work to get us here, but I was moving my legs as fast as I could.

Several seconds pass before I can breathe without feeling like my lungs are going to explode. When I can, I stand back up—and notice a few things all at the same time. One, this closet is really well stocked. Two, the door into the art classroom is wide open. And three, Jaxon is standing in the doorway, face wiped completely blank of expression.

My stomach drops at my first glimpse of his clenched fists and the wild fury burning in the depths of his eyes—not because I'm afraid but because it's obvious that he was.

For long seconds, no one says or does anything, except for Lia, who glances between Jaxon and me with a look that seems just a little bit sly. Then she tells him, "Don't worry, Jaxon darling; I'm fine." She pats him on his unscarred cheek as she walks right by him into the art classroom and closes the door behind her.

He doesn't even glance her way. His eyes, flat and black, are pinned to Flint. Who rolls his own eyes as he says, "They're both fine. You're welcome."

For long seconds, Jaxon doesn't respond. He doesn't even make a sound. But it turns out I only thought Jaxon was pissed before. Because after Flint's comment, he looks like he's one very small step away from an aneurysm. Or mass murder.

"Get out of here," he growls.

"I wasn't planning on sticking around." Flint doesn't move, though. Instead, he stays in front of me, staring Jaxon down.

And that's it. That's just it. "Move," I order, and when Flint doesn't move fast enough, I shove past him.

For a second, it looks like he's going to stop me, but a low snarl from Jaxon has him stepping back. Which only pisses me off more. I get that he was afraid for me, but that doesn't give him the right to act like a psychopath.

"Are you really okay?" Jaxon demands as I step forward.

"I'm fine." I try to shove past him, too, but unlike Flint, Jaxon doesn't move. He just stands there, in my way, eyes dark and still filled with anger...and something I can't quite put my finger on as he stares down at me. Whatever it is, it makes me feel all fizzy inside, like a carbonated drink that's been shaken way too much. Or it would if I let it. Right now, I'm too busy concentrating on

the anger to get sidetracked by the rest of it.

"I tell you to stay away from Flint, so you go into the tunnels with him?" he demands.

It's the way wrong thing to say to me right now, when adrenaline is still coursing through me from the quake. And the run. And the terror. But just because I was scared out of my mind a few minutes ago doesn't mean I'm going to put up with Jaxon demanding anything from me. Any more than I'm going to put up with him telling me what to do.

"I'm not talking to you about this right now," I answer. "I'm late for a class that I really didn't want to be late for, and the last thing I have time for is all this bizarre posturing from the two of you." I include Flint in my anger.

"There's no posturing, Grace." Jaxon reaches for me, but I yank my hand away before he can take hold of it.

"Whatever you want to call it. It's boring and annoying and I'm over it. So get out of my way and let me go to class before I forget I'm a pacifist and punch you in the face."

I'm not sure which word shocks him more—the "punch" or the "pacifist." Before either of us can figure it out, though, Flint jumps in with a, "You go, Grace. Tell him to back the fuck off."

This time, Jaxon's snarl is terrifying as fuck. It's also loud enough to have the class on the other side of this closet going completely silent—even the teacher. Which, terrific. Just freaking terrific.

I whirl on Flint. "You shut up, or I'll think of something really terrible to do to you, too." I turn back to Jaxon. "As for you, get the hell out of my way or I'm never talking to you again."

At first, Jaxon doesn't move. But I think that has more to do with complete and utter astonishment (if his face is anything to go by) rather than a deliberate attempt to push back at me.

In the end, though, he lifts his hands and steps out of my

way, exactly as I'd demanded.

"Thank you," I tell him much more quietly. "And I appreciate

your concern. I really do. But this is my first day of school, and I just want to go to class."

And then, without waiting for him to answer, I sweep past

him and into a classroom where everyone—even Lia and the teacher—is staring at me.

Big. Freaking. Surprise.

Big Girls Don't Cry (Unless They Want To)

race! Look out!"

I turn toward my cousin's voice—the first girl to speak to me since I went off on Jaxon and Flint five hours ago—just in time to see a basketball flying toward my head. I swat it away, then press my lips together to keep from crying out as pain radiates up my hand.

It's ridiculous that the act of deflecting a basketball could hurt this much, but whoever threw it threw it hard. My whole arm aches from the jolt of coming into contact with it, and I didn't even know that was possible.

"What the hell?" Macy asks the gym at large as she jogs over to me. "Who threw that?"

No one answers.

"Seriously?" My cousin puts her hands on her hips and glares at a group of girls standing by the locker room door. "Did you do this?"

"Don't worry about it," I tell her. "It doesn't matter."

"Doesn't matter? I heard how hard that ball hit your hand. If it had gotten your head, you could have had a concussion!"

"But it didn't. And I'm fine." It's a bit of a stretch, considering

I'm still in pain, but I've made a big enough spectacle of myself today, thank you very much. No way am I going to start whining about a few mean girls.

Or a lot of mean girls, for that matter, one of whom apparently has a future in professional basketball.

I mean, yeah, I'm not denying it's been a weird day. I haven't seen Jaxon or Flint since I went off on them this morning. But even though Jaxon hasn't shown up at any more of my classes, Byron was waiting outside my art class with an extra parka when it let out—so I wouldn't have to go through the spooky-as-hell tunnels again, thank God. Rafael sat with Macy and me at lunch plus walked us to AP Spanish, the one class we share. And Liam walked me from Spanish to PE.

None of which went unnoticed by the other students and none of which has exactly worked in my favor. I mean, I wasn't looking to make a bunch of friends here, but I also don't want to have to dodge flying basketballs every second of the day, either.

"You sure you're okay?" Macy asks, frowning at the way I'm wiggling my fingers and shaking my hand.

I stop immediately. "I'm sure. I'm fine." The last thing I want is for Macy to make a big deal out of something that could have been a lot worse.

She shakes her head but doesn't say anything else about the basketball. And if I catch her glaring at some of my classmates, I'm not going to call her out on it. I'd be pissed if someone was messing with her, too.

Still, it's past time to change the subject, so I ask, "What's all this?" gesturing to the black leotard, tights, and sequined skirt she's wearing.

"Dance team," she answers with a proud little grin. "I've got one of the solos at Friday's pep rally."

"Seriously? That's amazing!" I squeal, even though I've never

been a big dance team enthusiast. But Macy obviously loves it, and that's enough for me.

"Yeah. I'm dancing to—" She breaks off as the coach blows a whistle.

"What does that mean?" I ask.

"It means the period's over. And since this is the last one, it also means you're free." Macy grins. "I've got practice for two hours after school, but I'll find you when I'm done, and we can go to dinner together. If there's not another earthquake, that is."

"Right?" There have been several more tremors this afternoon—nothing big, just aftershocks, but they've definitely set most of the students, me included, on edge. "Who knew I'd experience more earthquakes in four days at the center of Alaska than I did my whole life living on the coast in California?"

"It's weird," she agrees, looking baffled. "Sure, we have a quake every once in a while, but we haven't had this many in a row in a long time. Maybe ever. You must have brought them with you."

"Sorry about that," I joke. "I'll try to tone it down."

"You do that," she answers with a grin. "See you after practice."

"See you."

I shoot her a little wave before heading back toward the locker room. No one bothers me as I change, but no one talks to me, either. And I gave up trying to talk to people somewhere around lunchtime. I can only take so many cold shoulders before I get the message.

I get dressed in record time, then grab my backpack and head out. I probably should go back to my room and get started on my homework, but I'm not used to being cooped up in one room all the time.

Back home, I was always outside—in the pool, at the beach,

running through the park. I even did my homework on the front porch swing, watching the sun set over the water.

Going from that to being stuck inside almost all the time is more than a little rough.

I think about heading to my room and changing into all those outdoor clothes so I can go for a walk. But nothing about me is particularly thrilled at the idea of putting on half my closet just to brave the subfreezing temperatures, either, so in the end, I decide on a compromise. I'll wander around the castle, getting to know it better, since there are huge portions I haven't set foot in yet, even with my classes taking me all over the place today.

For a second, Jaxon's warning from the first night flits through my head, but that was for late at night. Just because the sun outside the castle has been down for a couple of hours already doesn't mean the halls aren't safe now, while everyone is awake and going from one activity to another. Also, I'm not going to spend the next year and a half afraid of the people I go to school with. Those guys the other night were assholes, no doubt about it, but they caught me unprepared. No way am I going to let it happen again. And no way am I going to become a prisoner in my own school.

Thoughts of Jaxon have me pulling out my phone and opening my message app. There are six text messages waiting for me from Jaxon-all sent during the earthquake. I haven't opened them yet because at first I was too mad to want to know what he had to say. Then I didn't want to be around anyone when I opened them. I tend to wear my emotions on my sleeve, and the last thing I want is for someone watching me to see how I feel about Jaxon-especially when I currently have no idea what, if anything, is going to happen between us.

The first message came in a few minutes after Brit Lit got out. Jaxon: Hey, thought I'd catch you at art, but you aren't here. Are you lost? ;)

A few more minutes had passed before the second message came in.

Jaxon: Need a search and rescue? o_O

The third message came in pretty fast after the second one, followed in quick succession by the next three.

Jaxon: Sorry to bug you, just want to make sure you aren't in any trouble. Quinn and Marc aren't bothering you, are they?

Jaxon: Hey, you okay?

Jaxon: Getting worried over here. Just looking for a headsup that those jerks haven't found you again. You good?

Jaxon: Grace?

I remember the messages coming in during the earthquake and not paying any attention to them. But now that I've read them, I feel like a total jerk. Not for not answering them right away, because—earthquake!

And yeah, I definitely don't have to answer him just because he wants me to. But I do feel guilty for laying into him the way I did in the art studio when he was obviously just worried about me. And for not answering him for so long when he actually apologized in his texts—something—like please—I'm pretty sure the great Jaxon Vega almost never does.

All I was thinking about in that art closet was how embarrassed I was that he was there, arguing with Flint and making a spectacle of me. I didn't think about the fact that he was there because he was concerned about me and that the fight with Flint happened because he was so on edge.

In my old school, it would be absurd, and probably even a little freaky, to have a guy get so worried about me. But I can't really blame Jaxon for being legitimately concerned, not when he's already had to rescue me twice. And not when his last texts came in the middle of a freaking earthquake, which got people

so worked up that every teacher I had for the rest of the day took ten minutes out of class time to go over earthquake safety.

If everyone else is freaked out by the quake, it's hard to be upset at Jaxon for feeling the same way.

Because I feel bad for making him wait so long for a response, I fire off a couple of texts in quick succession.

Me: Sorry, been busy and haven't checked my phone

Me: You busy? Want to explore the castle with me?

Me: And hey, you never told me the punch line to the joke When he doesn't answer right away, I shove my phone in my

blazer pocket and wander into one of the side hallways with no real destination in mind for my exploration.

I pass a room where two people are fencing, complete with white uniforms and head masks, and pause to watch for a little while. Then I wander down to the music hall, where a curly-haired boy is playing the saxophone. I recognize the tune as "Autumn Leaves," and just the sound of it nearly brings me to my knees.

Cannonball Adderley cut an album in 1958 called *Somethin'* Else. Miles Davis and Art Blakey played on it, and it was my father's favorite—especially the song "Autumn Leaves." He used to play it over and over when he was working around the house, and he made me listen to it with him at least a hundred times, where he described every single note, explaining over and over how and why Adderley was such a genius.

The last month since my parents died is probably the longest I've gone without hearing that song in my entire life, and to run across it here, now, feels like a sign. Not to mention a punch to the gut.

Tears flood my eyes, and all I can think about is getting away. I turn and run, not caring where I'm going, knowing only that I need to escape.

I take the back stairs and climb up and up and up, until I arrive at the highest tower. Most of it is taken up by whatever room lies behind the closed door, but there's a tiny alcove right off the stairs with a huge window—the first one in the castle that I've actually seen with the curtains open—that looks out over the front of the school. It's dark out right now, but the view is still gorgeous: the snow lit up by lampposts and the midnight-blue sky filled with stars as far as the eye can see.

The room itself has built-in bookshelves that go all the way around it and a couple of comfy, overstuffed chairs to lounge in. It's obviously a reading nook—everything from the classics to modern-day Stephen King fill up the shelves—but I'm not here to read, no matter how much I usually love it.

Instead, I sink down on one of the chairs and finally, finally let the tears come.

There are a lot of them—I haven't cried, really cried, since the funeral, and now that I've started, I'm not sure I'll ever stop. Grief is a wild thing within me, a rabid animal tearing at my insides and making everything hurt.

I'm trying to be quiet—the last thing I want is to draw more attention to myself—but it's hard when it hurts this much. In self-defense, I wrap my arms around myself and start to rock, desperate to ease the pain. Even more desperate to find a way to hold myself together when everything inside me feels like it's falling apart.

It doesn't work. Nothing does, and the tears just keep coming, as do the harsh, wrenching sobs tearing from my chest.

I don't know how long I stay here, battling the pain and loneliness that comes from losing my parents in the blink of an eye and then everything familiar in my life less than a month later, but it's long enough for the sky to turn from the dark blue of civil twilight to pitch black.

Long enough for my chest to hurt.

More than long enough for the tears to run dry.

Somehow, running out of tears only makes everything hurt worse.

But sitting here isn't going to change that. Nothing is, which means I might as well get up. Macy should be done with dance practice soon, and the last thing I want is for her to come looking for me.

Having her see me like this—having *anyone* see me like this—is the threat that finally galvanizes me. Except that when I climb to my feet and turn around, it's to find that someone already has.

Jaxon.

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It's Not a Coincidence that Denali and Denial Use All the Same Letters

axon's standing at the head of the stairs, face blank but eyes searching as he stares at me.

Embarrassment slams through me, makes my face hot and my breath stutter. I start to ask him how long he's been there, but it doesn't really matter. He's been there long enough.

I wait for him to say something, to ask if I'm okay again or to tell me to stop whining or to say one of the million and three things that fall somewhere in between those two reactions.

He doesn't, though.

Instead, he just stands there, watching me with those blackmagic eyes of his until I lose my breath again...this time for a whole different reason.

"I-I'm sorry," I finally stumble out. "I should go."

He doesn't respond, so I move toward the stairs, but he keeps blocking them. And keeps watching me, head tilted just a little, like he's trying to figure something out while I pray for the ground to open up and swallow me.

Now would be a perfect time for another one of those earthquakes, is all I'm saying.

When he finally speaks, his voice sounds a little rusty. "Why?"

"Why should I leave? Or why was I crying?"

"Neither."

"I...have no idea what I'm supposed to say to that." I blow out a long breath. "Look, I'm sorry I threatened to hit you in the art studio today. You're just...a lot sometimes."

He lifts a brow, but other than that, his blank expression doesn't change. "So are you."

"Yeah." I give a watery laugh, gesture to my still-wet cheeks. "Yeah, I can see why you might think that."

I'm only a few steps from him, but he closes the gap, moving in until he's only inches away from me. My mouth goes desert dry.

I wait for him to say something, but he doesn't. I wait for him to touch me, but he doesn't do that, either. Instead, he just stands there, so close that I can feel his breath on my cheek. So close that I'm sure he can feel my breath on his.

And still his eyes are dark, empty, blank.

More seconds that feel like minutes tick by until finally, finally he whispers, "What's it like?"

"What's what like?" I'm baffled, and a little afraid that I'm setting myself up to be the punch line of some joke.

"What's it like to just be able to let go like that?"

"Like what? My crying jag?" Embarrassment swamps me again, and I wipe at my cheeks, trying to disappear even the remnants of my tears. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for anyone to see me. I—"

"Not just that. I mean, what's it like to be able to show what you feel and how you feel, whenever you want, without having to worry about..." He trails off.

"What?" I ask. "Without having to worry about what?"

For long seconds, he just looks at me. Then he kind of shakes his head and says, "Never mind." He walks past me, opens the door to the room that lays just beyond the alcove, and walks inside.

I stare after him, not sure what I'm supposed to do. It feels like our conversation is over, like he just dismissed me, but he left his door open in what looks like an invitation.

I stand there for another minute or so, undecided, before he finally sticks his head back out the door. "Coming?" he asks.

I follow him inside—of course I do. But I'm completely unprepared for what I find when I walk into the room, a room I can't help thinking of as my own private wonderland.

Books are everywhere, stacked haphazardly on nearly every available surface.

There are three guitars in the corner, along with a drum kit that has my mouth watering and my fingers itching to touch it. To play it, like I used to play mine back when I still had one.

Back when I still had a lot of things.

In the center of the room is a giant black leather couch, covered with piles of thick, soft pillows that all but beg to be napped on.

I want to touch everything, want to run my hands over the drum kit just so I can feel its soul. I have just enough self-control left not to follow my impulses, but it's hard. So hard that I can't help but tuck my hands in my blazer pockets, just to be on the safe side.

Because I've only just now realized that this is Jaxon's dorm room, and to say it's unexpected is pretty much the understatement of the century.

Jaxon seems completely uninterested in his surroundings, which seems bizarre to me even though I know it's because this is his stuff. He sees and touches and uses it every day. But there's a part of me that still wants to know how he can just ignore the pile of art books by the couch or the giant purple crystal on his desk. It's the same part of me all but screaming that, no matter what Jaxon thinks, I'm nowhere near cool

enough to be in here with him.

Since he's not talking, I turn to look at the art on the wall, big, wild paintings with bold colors and strokes that excite all kinds of ideas inside me. And hanging next to his desk—even more unbelievably—is a small pencil sketch of a woman with wild hair and sly eyes, dressed in a voluminous kimono.

I recognize it, or at least I think I do, so I walk closer, trying to get a better look. And sure enough—

"This is a Klimt!" I tell him.

"Yes," he affirms.

"That wasn't a question." It's under glass, so I reach out and tap the artist's signature in the bottom right corner. "This is an original Klimt, not a reproduction."

This time he doesn't say anything, not even yes.

"So you're just going to stand there with your hands in your pockets?" I demand. "You're not even going to answer me?"

"You just told me you weren't asking questions."

"I'm not. But that doesn't mean I don't want to hear the story." He shrugs. "There's no story."

"You have an original Klimt hanging next to your desk. Believe me, there's a story there." My hands are shaking as I trace the lines through the glass once again. I've never been this close to one of his pieces before.

"I liked it. It reminded me of someone. I bought it."

"That's it? That's your story?" I stare at him incredulously.

"I told you there wasn't a story. You insisted there was." He cocks his head to the side, watches me through narrowed eyes. "Did you want me to lie?"

"I want you to..." I shake my head, blow out another long breath. "I don't know what I want you to do."

At that, he lets out a small laugh—the very first sign of emotion he's shown since that one frantic are you okay in the

art room. "I know the feeling."

He's halfway across the room, and there's a part of me that wishes he were closer. That wishes we were touching right now.

Of course, there's another part of me that's still terrified of touching him, even more terrified of having him touch me. Being in his room is too much. Looking at him worry his lower lip in the first show of nerves I've ever seen from him is too much.

Being touched by him, held by him, kissed by him, would be so, so, so too much that I'm afraid I'll implode at the first brush of his lips against mine. Afraid I'll just burn up where I'm standing. No warning, no chance to stop it. Just a brush of his hand against mine and poof, I'm a goner. I swear it almost happened when he carried me back to my room the other night, and that was before he sent me waffles and walked me to class and charmed me with his text messages. Way before I saw this place.

I wonder if he's afraid of the same thing, because instead of answering, he turns around and enters what I assume is his bedroom. At least until he realizes I'm still staring at the Klimt—and every other fabulous thing in the room—to be following him.

He kind of rolls his eyes, but then he comes back and gently herds me toward his bedroom, all without laying a finger on me.

"Come on. There's something I want you to see."

I follow him without question. With Flint earlier, I had moments of concern, of worry that it wasn't safe to be alone with him. Everything inside me warns that Jaxon is a million times more dangerous than Flint, and still I have not an ounce of trepidation when it comes to being alone in his bedroom with him. When it comes to being anywhere, or doing anything, with him.

I don't know if that makes me foolish or a good judge of character. Not that it really matters, because it is what it is.

Jaxon stops near the edge of his bed and picks up the heavy

red blanket folded across the edge of it. Then he reaches into his top dresser drawer and pulls out a pair of faux fur-lined gloves and tosses them to me. "Put those on and come on."

"Come on where?" I ask, baffled. But I do as he asks and slide my hands into the gloves.

He opens the window, and frigid air rushes in.

"You can't be serious. No way am I going out there. I'll freeze."

He looks over his shoulder at me and winks. He winks.

"What was that?" I demand. "Since when do you wink?"

He doesn't answer beyond a quick twist of his lips. And then climbs out the window and drops three feet onto the parapet just below the tower.

I should ignore him, should simply turn around and walk out of this room, away from any boy who thinks I'm dumb enough to hang out on an Alaskan roof in November with nothing more than a blazer to keep me warm. That's what I should do.

Of course, just because I should do it doesn't mean I will.

Because, apparently, when I'm with this boy, I lose all common sense. And part of losing that common sense means doing exactly what I shouldn't—in this case, following Jaxon straight out the window and onto the parapet.

Madonna's Not the Only One with a Lucky Star

he second I drop down beside him—or should I say the second he helps me down, being super careful of my still tender ankle—Jaxon wraps the blanket around me, head and all, so that only my eyes stick out. And I have to say, I'm not sure what the blanket is made of, but the moment it's wrapped around me, I stop shivering. I'm not exactly warm, but I'm definitely not going to be dying of hypothermia anytime soon, either.

"What about you?" I ask when I realize he's wearing only his hoodie. It's a heavy hoodie, the same one he was wearing when I saw him outside yesterday with Lia, but still, nowhere near enough protection for the weather. "We can share the blanket."

I break off when he laughs. "I'm fine. You don't need to worry about me."

"Of course I'm going to worry about you. The weather is frigid."

He shrugs. "I'm used to it."

"That's it. I have to ask."

Everything about him turns wary. "Ask what?"

"Are you an alien?"

Both his brows go up this time, all the way to his hairline.

"Excuse me?"

"Are. You. An. Alien? I can't believe it's that shocking of a question. I mean, look at you." I wave an arm up and down under the blanket, my way of encompassing everything that is Jaxon in one fell swoop.

"I can't look at myself." For the first time, he sounds amused.

"You know what I mean."

"I really don't." He leans down so there's only a couple of inches separating our faces. "You're going to have to explain it to me."

"Like you don't already know you're pretty much the hottest person alive."

He rears back like I've struck him, and I don't think he even realizes that he touches his scar as he says, "Yeah, right."

Which...come on. "You have to know that scar makes you sexy as hell, right?"

"No." It's a short answer. Simple. Succinct, even. And yet it reveals so much more than he'd ever want anyone to see.

"Well, it does. Sexy. As. Hell," I repeat. "Plus, there's the way everyone pretty much kisses your ass *all* the time."

"Not everyone." He gives me a pointed look.

"Almost everyone. And you never get cold."

"I get cold." He burrows a hand inside the blanket, presses his fingers to my arm. And he's right; he is cold. But he's also nowhere close to being frostbitten, which is what I would be if I'd stood out here this long in just a hoodie.

I give him a look and try to pretend that, despite the chill, his hand on my arm doesn't flood every cell of my body with heat. "You know what I mean."

"So let me get this straight. Because I: one, am the hottest person alive"—he smirks as he says it—"two, make everyone genuflect, and three, don't get cold very often, you've decided I'm an alien."

"Do you have a better explanation?"

He pauses, considers. "I do, actually."

"And it is what exactly?"

"I could tell you..."

"But then you'd have to kill me?" I roll my eyes. "Seriously?

We've reverted to tired old *Top Gun* lines?"

"That's not what I was going to say."

"Oh yeah?" It's my turn to cock my head to the side. "So what were you going to say?"

"I was going to say, 'You can't handle the truth."

He totally deadpans it, but I burst out laughing anyway. Because how can I not when he's quoting *A Few Good Men* to me? "So you're an old-movie buff? Or just an old-Tom Cruisemovie buff?"

"Ugh." He makes a face. "Definitely not the second. As for old movies, I've seen a few."

"So if I mentioned starving women and making a dress out of their skin, you'd know I meant—"

"Buffalo Bill from Silence of the Lambs? Yeah."

I grin at him. "So maybe not an alien after all."

"Definitely not an alien."

Silence stretches between us for a while. It's not awkward. In fact, it's kind of nice to just be able to be for a little while. But eventually the cold works its way through his magic blanket. I pull it more closely around myself and ask, "Are you going to tell me what we're doing out here?"

"I told you I was going to show you my favorite place today."

"This is your favorite place?" I look around with new eyes, determined to figure out what he likes about it.

"I can see for miles up here, and no one ever bothers me. Plus..." He glances at his phone, then very deliberately looks up at the sky. "You'll figure it out in about three minutes."

"Is it the aurora borealis?" I ask, trepidation replaced instantly by excitement. "I've been dying to see it."

"Sorry. You've got to be up in the middle of the night to get a look at the northern lights."

"So then what—?" I break off as what appears to be a giant fireball streaks its way across the sky. Seconds later, another one follows it.

"What's going on?" I wonder aloud.

"A meteor shower. We don't get many up here because they tend to take place in the summer, when we've got daylight most of the time and can't see them. But when we do have one in the winter, it's pretty spectacular."

I gasp as another three meteors fly by, leaving long, glowing tails in their wake. "That's an understatement. This is incredible."

"I thought you might like it."

"I do. I really do." I glance at him, suddenly shy, though I don't know why. "Thank you."

He doesn't answer, but then I'm not expecting him to.

We stand out on the parapet for a good half an hour, not talking, not even looking at each other much, just watching the most brilliant show I've ever seen light up the sky. And I love every second of it.

It's weird, but something about being out here, looking at the vast night sky overlooking the vast, snowy mountains...it puts things in perspective. Reminds me of how tiny I really am in the grand scheme of things, of how fleeting my problems and my grief are, no matter how painful and all-encompassing they feel right now.

Maybe that's what Jaxon intended when he brought me out here.

When the shower ends, it comes with a burst of seven or eight

comets in a row. I can't help oohing and aahing as they burn their way across the sky. When it's over, I expect to feel let down—like what happens at the end of a really good movie or fireworks show. That little pang of disappointment that something so wonderful is over forever.

But with the meteor shower, I feel...as close to peaceful as I have in a very long time.

"We should go in," Jaxon says eventually. "It's getting colder."

"I'm okay. I just want another minute or two, if that's all right." He inclines his head in an of course kind of gesture.

There's so much I want to say to him, so many things he's done for me in the very short time we've known each other. But whenever I try to come up with the words, they don't sound right in my head. So eventually, I settle for "Thank you."

He laughs, but it's a sound completely devoid of humor. I don't understand why until I look in his eyes and realize they are completely blank again. I don't like it at all.

"Why do you laugh when I thank you?" I demand.

"Because you don't ever have to thank me, Grace."

"Why not? You did something really nice for me-"

"No I didn't."

"Um, yeah you did." Under the blanket, I hold my arms out in the universal gesture of look-at-all-this. "Why don't you just admit it? Take the compliment and move on."

"Because I don't deserve the compliment." The words seems to burst straight out of him without his permission, and now that they're hanging there, he looks a little sick. "I'm just doing my..."

"Your what? Your *job*?" I ask, my stomach clenching at the thought. "Did my uncle ask you to be nice to me or something?"

He laughs, but there's still no amusement in the sound. No joy. Just a soul-deep cynicism that has my eyes watering all over again but for very different reasons. "I'm the last person Foster

would ever ask to be friends with you."

If I were more polite and less concerned about him, I'd be inclined to drop the subject entirely. But politeness has never been one of my virtues—I've got too much curiosity for that—so instead, I call him on his shit. "And why is that exactly?"

"It means I'm not a nice person. I don't do *nice* things. Ever. So it's ridiculous to compliment me on your perception of what I do."

"Really?" I shoot him a skeptical look. "Because I hate to be the one to break it to you, but cheering up a sad girl is a *nice* thing to do. So is carrying her back to her dorm when she hurts her ankle and chasing off guys who think pranks that can kill people are funny. So is charming the cook into making an injured girl waffles. All nice things, Jaxon."

For the first time, he looks uncomfortable, but he still won't back down. "I didn't do it for you."

"Oh yeah? Then who did you do it for?"

He doesn't have an answer. Of course he doesn't.

"That's what I thought." I grin up at him, all cocky and obnoxious because, on this, I can be. "Looks to me like you're just going to have to accept the fact that you did something sweet. You won't burn at the stake, I promise."

"They only burn witches."

He sounds so serious that I can't stop myself from laughing. "Well, I'm pretty sure we're safe, then."

"Don't be too sure about that."

I start to ask him what he means, but a violent shiver racks me at the same time—blanket or no blanket, it's freaking cold out here—and Jaxon takes the decision into his own hands. "Come on. Time to get you inside."

Hard to argue when my teeth are about a minute away from chattering. But when I glance up at the window we came out of,

I can't help wondering, "How exactly are we going to get back in? And by we, I mean me." Dropping three feet out of a window is one thing. Boosting myself back up is another thing entirely.

But Jaxon just shakes his head. "Don't worry. I've got you, Grace."

Before I can figure out why those words sizzle through me like a lightning bolt, he's grabbing onto the windowsill and swinging himself inside. The whole move takes about one point four seconds, and I have to admit, I'm impressed. Then again, nearly everything Jaxon does impresses me, whether he means it to or not. *He* impresses me.

More, he makes me feel not so alone at a time when I've never been lonelier.

He's back in moments, poking his head and upper body out of the window. "Give me your hands."

I lift my arms up without a second thought, and he grabs onto my forearms, right below the elbow, and pulls. Seconds later, I'm back through the window and standing an inch, maybe two, from Jaxon.

And for once, his eyes aren't dead. They're on fire.

And they're focused directly. On. Me.